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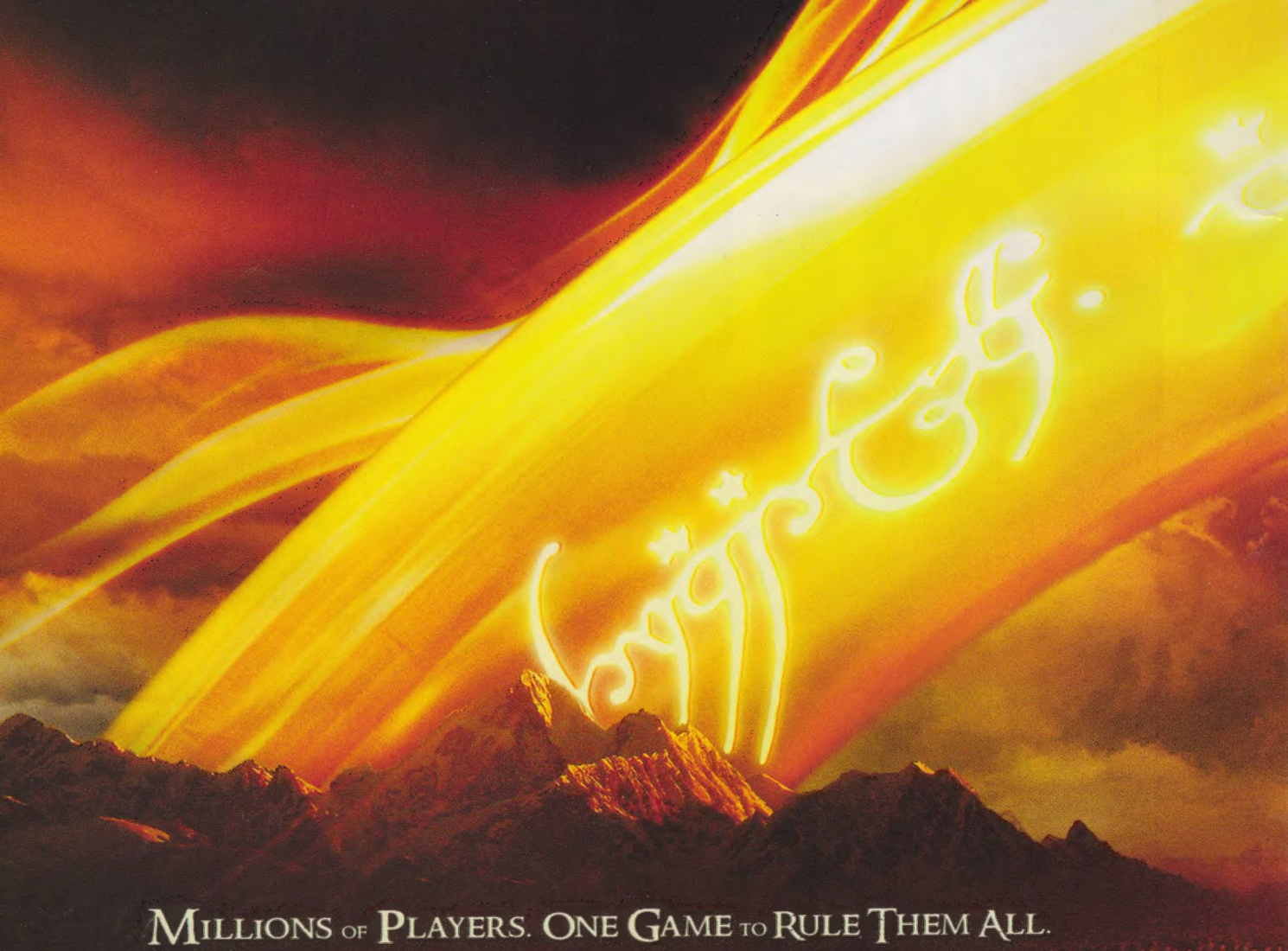

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ABOVE and TOP: Fantasy watercolorist Stephanie Pui-Mun Law is the subject of this issue's Gallery.

COVER: Karl Urban as Ghost in Pathfinder. *Courtesy of 20th Century Fox; photo by Doug Curran.*

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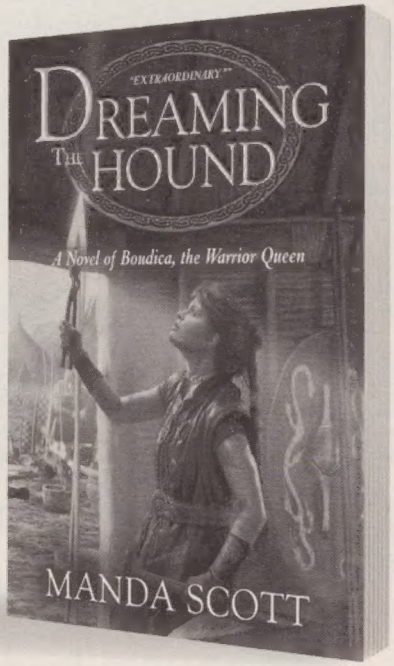

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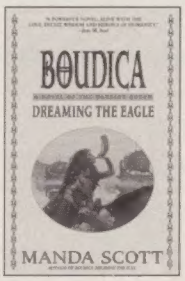

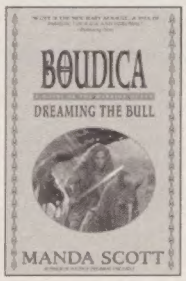

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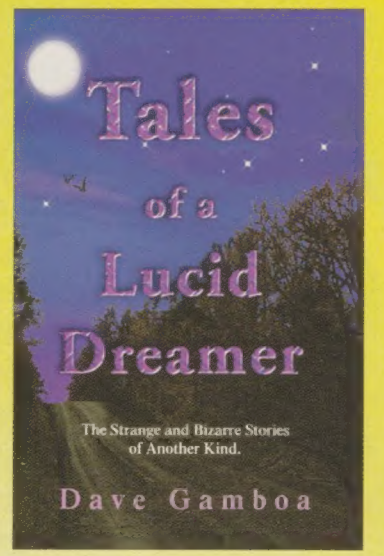

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CHARLES DANA VESS was born in 1951 in Lynchburg, Virginia, and has been drawing ever since he could hold a crayon. When he was a bit older and had left the Crayola medium behind him, he graduated with a BFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. He then worked in commercial animation for Candy Apple Productions in Richmond, Virginia, until moving to New York City in 1976. It was there that he became a freelance illustrator, working for many publications including *Heavy Metal,* Klutz Press, Epic Comics, and *National Lampoon.*

CHARLES DE LINT was born in Bussum, the Netherlands in 1951, but his family soon emigrated to Canada. He pioneered the urban fantasy genre, beginning with his 1984 novel *Moonheart.* He has been a World Fantasy Award finalist 17 times for various novels, stories, and collections, winning in 2000 for *Moonlight and Vines,* in 2002 for *The Onion Girl,* in 2003 for *Waifs and Strays,* and in 2004 for the short story "Circle of Cats." His latest novel is *Widdershins* (2006), which takes place in the popular fictionalized city of Newford.

HEINZ INSU FENKL is a writer, translator, editor, and folklorist. His published works include the novels *Memories of My Ghost Brother* and *Shadows Bend,* the anthology *Kori: The Beacon Anthology of Korean American Short Stories,* short fiction, and articles on folklore, myth, language, Asian literature, Korean shamanism, and other subjects. He recently contributed to *Interfictions,* an anthology forthcoming from Small Beer Press. Fenkl teaches creative writing at the State University of New York, New Paltz, and is the director of ISIS: The Institute of Interstitial Studies. Raised in Korea, Germany, and the United States, he now lives in New York with his wife and daughter. His previous columns for Folkroots can be found online on the Endicott Studio for Mythic Arts website: *www.endicott-studio.com.*

DAVID PINAULT is an associate professor of religious studies at Santa Clara University in northern California. "Afghan Buddha Payback" was inspired by his fieldwork in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. He is the author of several books on Arabic literature and Islamic studies, including *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community,* and *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India.* Currently David is at work on a new book, to be entitled *Notes from the Fortune-Telling Parrot: Islam and the Struggle for Religious Pluralism in Pakistan.*

LORI KOEFOED is a native Californian and a graduate of San Diego State University (BA Advertising) and California State University Long Beach (MFA Illustration). Since 1994, she has worked as a freelance illustrator in the advertising, greeting card, magazine, and book publishing industries. Lori's work has been featured in several juried annuals and exhibitions, including the Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles (SILA), Communication Arts Illustration Annual (41), and Spectrum. Her original paintings have also been shown in various galleries and art museums in Southern California. In addition to her freelance work, Lori teaches classes at the Art Institute of Southern California in Laguna Beach.

THEODORA GOSS lives in Boston, where she is completing a Ph.D. in English literature and teaching a class on Fantasy and the Fantastic. Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons, Alchemy, Polyphony,* and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet,* as well as in this magazine, and have been reprinted in *Year's Best Fantasy* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror.* She recently won the Rhysling Award for speculative poetry. Visit her website at www.theodoragoss.com.

M.K. HOBSON's stories have appeared in many fine publications and anthologies, including *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, SCI FICTION, Strange Horizons,* and *Polyphony 5.* She maintains a blog (*www.bricoleur.livejournal.com*), a website (*www.demimonde.com*), and a family (husband, daughter, and two grumpy cats).

MICHAEL GIBBS has been a freelance illustrator since the early 1980s. After majoring in architecture for a year at the University of Maryland, he attended Pratt Institute as a photography major, switching to illustration in his final year. Michael's style has evolved from traditional painting to a unique blend of traditional and digital techniques, with frequent forays into purely digital illustration. He was an early devotee of the Macintosh, Photoshop, and digital illustration, and has been using the Mac and Photoshop since shortly after they were introduced. His illustrations have received recognition from the Society of Illustrators, Communication Arts, Print, Spectrum Annual of Science Fiction/Fantasy Illustration, and others. He was honored with a Spectrum Gold Medal award in 2004.

STEPHEN CHAMBERS is the author of *Hope's End* (Tor Books, 2001) and *Hope's War* (Tor Books, 2002). He attended the Odyssey Writing Conference, and after graduating from the University of Chicago, he worked for two years at Doubleday/Broadway Books where he assisted both the executive director of marketing and executive editor. In addition to his wife and two children, Stephen lives with two cats and one big dog.

TODAY, I STARTED EARLY IN THE TRENCHES. AND FACED A PANZER **TANK** ABOUT TO CRUSH ME. I LOBBED A GRENADE JUST UNDER IT AND HIT THE DIRT. WHEN I LOOKED UP, I FOUND MYSELF INCHES AWAY FROM AN **ELF QUEEN**. SHE SMILED, AND THEN TRIED TO TAKE MY HEAD OFF WITH A SWORD. SPINNING AROUND, I FOUND MYSELF TEAMED UP WITH THE WORLD'S GREATEST **SUPERHEROES**. FENDING OFF AN ATTACK. TAKING COVER BEHIND A WALL. I SOON REALIZED I WAS LOST IN A GIANT **DUNGEON**. GETTING OUT WOULD TAKE SOME DOING.

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By Resa Nelson

Pathfinder blends oral history with fantasy in the tradition of a Norse saga.

By the time the new movie *Pathfinder* opens on April 20, it's likely to be an international hit. It's a canny strategy being executed by 20th Century Fox: if *Pathfinder* does well overseas, it's more likely to open in a multiplex near you instead of getting lost in the Hollywood shuffle. So far, this strategy is paying off. *Pathfinder* opened first in Russia then in Thailand this past winter, ruling the box office in each country as the number one film.

Pathfinder tells the story of a Viking boy who survives a shipwreck off the shores of North America. He's discovered and adopted by a Native American family and given the name "Ghost." Years later, when Ghost is 20 (played by Karl Urban of *Lord of the Rings*), he returns from hunting to discover his entire tribe has been murdered by marauding Vikings who intend to establish a new settlement in North America. Suddenly confronted by this horde of Vikings, Ghost is injured but escapes. Desperate, he makes his way to a neighboring tribe to seek refuge. However, that tribe's pathfinder (a shaman, played by Russell Means of *Last of the Mohicans* and TV's *Into the West*) tells Ghost that he has brought evil to the tribe, thanks to the blood trail he's left unintentionally for the Vikings to follow. Ghost realizes the pathfinder is right. In order to protect these Native Americans, Ghost decides to face the Vikings by himself and draw them away from the blood trail.

Pathfinder photos courtesy of 20th Century Fox/by Doug Curran

Karl Urban plays Ghost, who was adopted by Native Americans as a child and must now battle the Vikings to protect them.

Pathfinder is a story near and dear to the heart of director/producer Marcus Nispel (*Texas Chainsaw*

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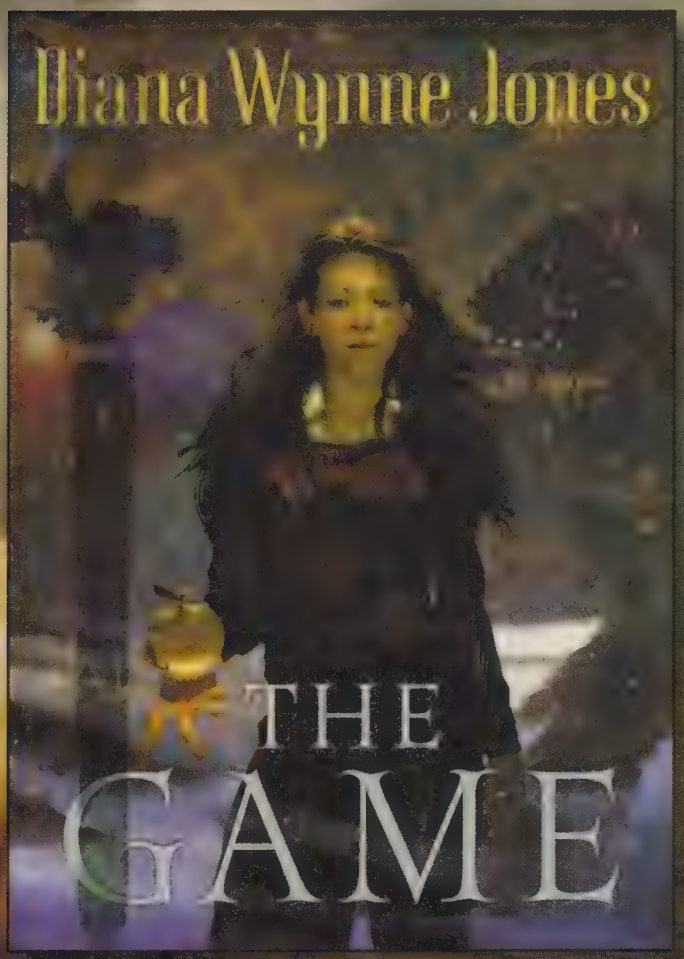

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Massacre and TV's *Frankenstein*). Nispel is a German who came to the United States with dreams of becoming a professional painter or graphic novel illustrator.

"This one is much more personal than it might seem, because it's very much an immigrant's movie," Nispel says. "You come from Germany and you get embraced by an industry that's predominantly Jewish—you think about that every day. *Pathfinder* is for all those that come from a certain background and have mixed feelings about their heritage and try to sort out those feelings in the New World."

For many years, Nispel dreamed about making a movie about gladiators, but those dreams were dashed when *Gladiator* was released. Next, he set his sights on making a pirate movie, but *Pirates of the Caribbean* killed that plan. For Nispel, the third time was the charm, and it began with something he had long known about American history. Although Americans traditionally give credit to Christopher Columbus for the discovery of their continent by Europeans, it's undeserved. Norse people—some of whom were Vikings—had an oral tradition of storytelling, and many of these stories (known as "sagas") were written down mainly in the 1200s and 1300s, long before Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492. Some consider these sagas to be pure fiction, others believe they're historical in nature, and others yet refer to them as the first historical novels. One of the Icelandic sagas is called *The Vinland Saga* and tells the tale, which took place around the year 1000, of Leif Eriksson's discovery of North America. known as "Vinland" by the Norse immigrants who settled Iceland.

For German director/producer Marcus Nispel, Pathfinder *was very personal undertaking."It's very much an immigrant's movie," he says*

"In a way. Ghost is the first American." Nispel says. "When I did research for the movie, I could not find one image of a Viking and a Native American in one shot. There's no movie, there's no etching, no illustration. I said, 'I want to be the first one who puts that image together.' That's very important to me. But I didn't want to get hung for something that nobody knows anything about. But in the very same way that America doesn't have any history that goes further away than Christopher Columbus or any mythology that goes

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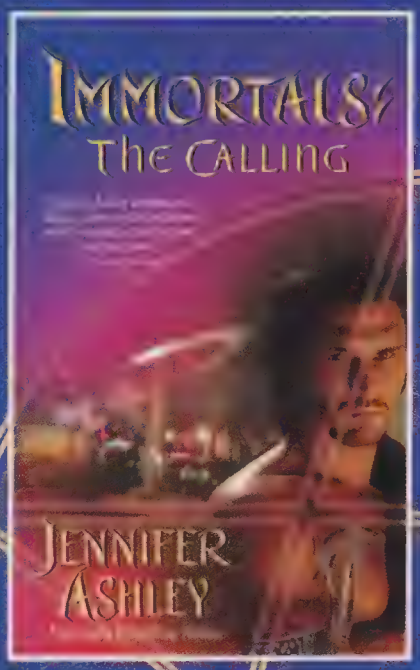

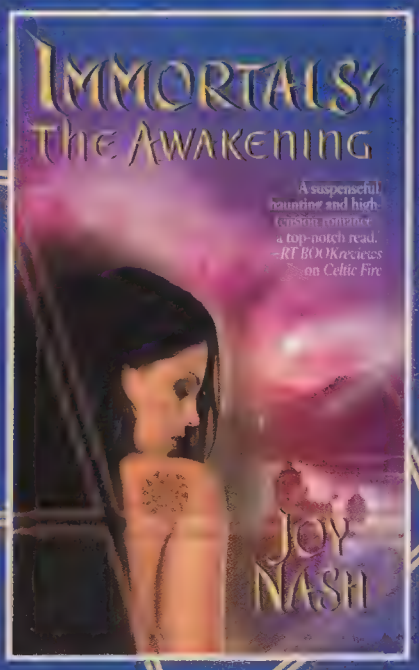
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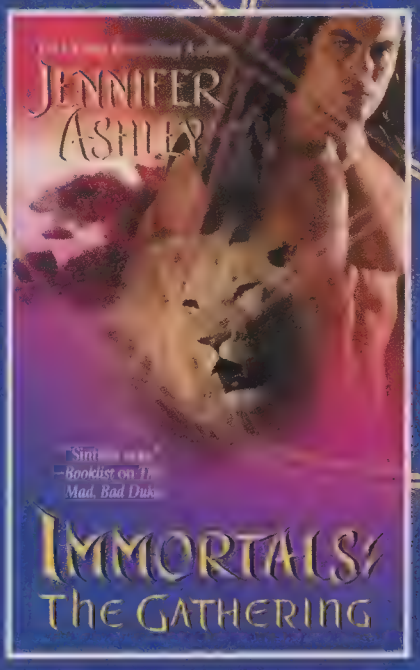

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beyond the cowboy movie, to do an American *Nibelungenlied* [a famous German saga] or King Arthur, we took a bit of license."

The liberties that Nispel takes are what makes *Pathfinder* a fantasy film. As he worked with costume designer Renee April (*Night at the Museum, The Fountain*), they decided to ground the Native Americans in reality but give the Vikings a fantasy look. In fact, *Pathfinder* was intended to lean more toward fantasy than reality.

"My original approach had a lot of fantasy in it," Nispel says. "I always felt that the lessons the pathfinder is imparting happen in the subconscious. I think the subconscious happens when you're about to die or when you're dreaming or when you're drugged out or when you're starving. All these things make us go deep inside. There was one version of the movie where Ghost almost drowns and the pathfinder suddenly talks to him underwater. It's interesting that the studio said, 'We want you to go back to the original idea that you pitched to us that's more like a real, physical experience like a *First Blood* or *Apocalypto* but keep it reality-ground.' I went with it because the movie ran long. But ironically, for the DVD I've kept all the fantasy sequences. There is definitely a lot of mythology still in there, but we literally had fantasy sequences that would reoccur throughout the movie. I think the biggest discussions about the movie was fantasy vs. no fantasy and a PG-13 versus an R rating. Thank God it got the R rating, because kids shouldn't be allowed to see it.

"If you look at the poster, you can see the strong fantasy aspect to it, but the adventure is reality bound, kind of like Tarzan—he's the only human superhero. There's a certain fantasy aspect to it, but on the other hand, it's very, very real."

The reality base of the movie lies mostly in its landscape. Describing himself as "low tech," Nispel wanted nothing to do with computer graphics. "I'm always interested in this really primordial, grimy way of showing how things were back then," he says. "I was a Boy Scout. I'm interested in earthy things where you get dirty. I spent my childhood playing in the mud. I look at the generation now that is so high tech. The advertising people and movie people say, 'Well, what do they like? They love computers, so let's show them movies with lots of computers like *Mission Impossible*. I wasn't really into that. I want to show people what it's like to get dirty and be tribal."

To accomplish that goal, Nispel nixed the idea of filming indoors and shot the movie in a rainforest near Vancouver, Canada, during autumn and winter. But it turned out to be a far greater challenge than Nispel anticipated.

"Single-handedly, the toughest thing was the weather in Canada," Nispel says. "When I went in, I said, 'I want this to be a true experience, so we're not going to do any special effects. It's real stuff, it's a real situation, it's a real environment. So we wrote a long letter to warn the crew. We said, 'If you sign onto this, it's going to be hell, because we're not doing it in a studio. We're not doing it against a green screen. You'll be out there in the elements.' What I didn't know was how bad it was going to be. We had rain throughout. In the second half, snow throughout. We had a flesh-eating virus. I'm not proud of this, but we had almost 100 hospitalizations, 20 in a two-day period alone. Mostly broken legs, broken ankles from slipping on rocks and into trees. There's such a high tolerance for CG because this is a generation that grew up playing video games, and that's exactly what I wanted to battle.

"The absolute insanity was when we were looking for horses. I wanted Clydesdales, and there's a lot of horse stunts. I found this incredible trainer who actually trained Clydesdales to take tumbles. They're falling through mud and rolling around—it's unbelievable."

When developing the story, Nispel was inspired by a Norwegian film from the 1980s that told a Lappish tale. Tapping into his roots as a painter, Nispel worked with screenwriter Laeta Kalogridis (*Alexander*, TV's *Birds of Prey*) and artist Christopher Shy to tell his story of Native Americans and Vikings in the form of a graphic novel, which was published in 2006 by Dark Horse Comics. Nispel based his movie on that graphic novel, but it wasn't easy to cast.

"I didn't want to do the movie with a star," Nispel says. "Right when I started to conceive it, Brad Pitt got all that hell for walking around in a loincloth [in *Troy*]. I thought, I don't want to hear this. And the truth is, when I tried to find actors for it, a lot of them would turn it down because pretty much the guy is naked in the movie throughout. He's wearing leggings but not anything on top, because I wanted him to look vulnerable. We were shooting in Canada in the winter. Karl Urban took a beating. I didn't want somebody who was known who would be ridiculed for that. Karl Urban is known in a circle, but he's also known to take these kinds of risks."

Ironically, when Nispel first considered Urban, he wasn't sure who the actor was. "To

PAINKILLER JANE

In April, look for a new hour-long superhero TV series called *Painkiller Jane* to premiere on the SCI FI Channel, which already has committed to airing 22 episodes. The series is based on a comic by the same name and stars Kristanna Loken (*Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, TV's *Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King*). Loken plays Jane Vasko, who lives in a future where the greatest problem is a global drug addiction that has reached epidemic proportions. Jane is a researcher at one of the world's largest pharmaceutical corporations. One day, she stumbles onto information that makes her believe that the very company that employs her may be harboring a secret research program and possibly even some kind of conspiracy.

Jane becomes a DEA informant and hopes to expose the corruption linked to her employer, but she soon becomes a target instead. In a twist of fate, she's recruited by a covert government agency whose mission is to hunt down and capture "Neuros," humans who have been genetically altered so they have special powers. While working with this covert government agency, Jane discovers that she, too, has unusual abilities. Like the cheerleader Claire on TV's *Heroes*, Jane's body suddenly gains the ability to regenerate after any injury. However, there's a side effect. Jane feels pain when she's injured, and that pain won't go away. The more she's hurt, the more pain piles up inside.

As Jane continues hunting Neuros, her personal mission becomes figuring out what happened to her and if she has any connection with the very people she's tracking.

The truth about Jane is that she's been exposed accidentally to an experimental drug meant to be a cure. But there's a problem. This experimental drug is so unstable that its impact gives her less than a month to live. In the meantime, she's still being pursued by people who intend to kill her. She struggles to find a way to stay alive in every sense. Ironically, every time she's hurt, her body grows stronger and she develops new powers. But with more power comes more pain.

According to Sci Fi Wire, Loken said, "I read the comic and fell in love with the depth of the comic-book character. It just had so many different levels: the pain and the healing and the kind of eternal question of 'why is this happening to me?' is a very human statement."

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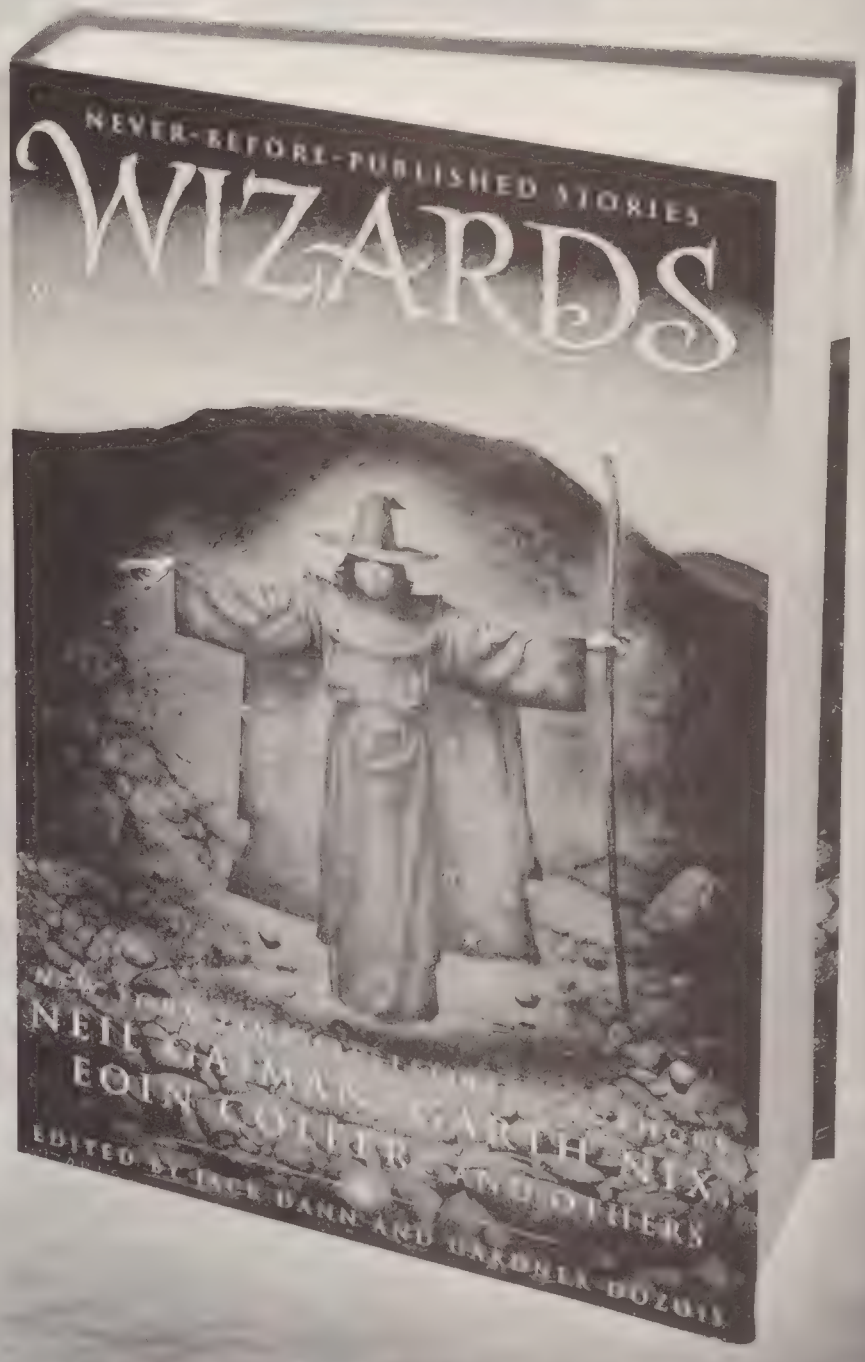

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FALL UNDER THEIR SPELL

show you how ignorant I am, I've seen *Lord of the Rings,* but I haven't really seen Karl that well in it—he wore the wig, he wore the helmet. I didn't know that was the same guy I saw in *The Bourne Supremacy.* I said, 'Let's hire the Russian. Who cares if he doesn't speak English—there's hardly any dialog in the movie!' Pathfinder has maybe 15 sentences of dialog. He really impressed me. We hired him very late in the game. Then I thought, how are we going to do this in this short amount of time, because I wanted to send him to boot camp for riding and sword play, and he said, 'Don't you worry. I've got that covered.'

Karl Urban had no difficulty with the swordplay and riding required for the role of Ghost, but the Canadian weather was another matter.

"And then Clancy Brown, who was a villain in *Highlander,* knew sword play. And Ralf Moeller, my homeboy from Germany, he was the German gladiator and he knew sword play, so that worked out pretty well."

As *Pathfinder* makes its way around the world before debuting in the United States, Nispel looks forward to that final opening day and is getting ready for it. "We have a successful comic book, we have action figures—we have all sorts of things that I initiated to build a bit of a culture. When I was a kid, before *Star Wars* was released in Germany, I already had the soundtrack. I played in the sandbox with the action figures. I had the comic books. And then the movie came out and I was ready to explode."

Time will tell how much of an explosion *Pathfinder* will generate. In the meantime, Nispel has plenty of good memories from making the film. "I had a really happy experience with the crew. I storyboarded 3000 drawings myself. At the end, when I called a wrap, they presented me with a piñata and I got a sword to hit it. When I hit the piñata, all the storyboard frames came falling out. And everybody cried. There were these huge Vikings with tears in their eyes. It is such a great experience when you have everybody with so much heart in it. That's what I remember the most."

On May 11, look for *28 Weeks Later* (Fox Searchlight), a sequel to 2002's sleeper hit, *28 Days Later.* Set in London, the first film was a fresh spin on zombie movies: a virus spread accidentally from monkeys to humans, and 28 days later, people killed by the virus arose from the dead as zombies. But instead of Hollywood's traditional foot-dragging, slow-poke monsters, these zombies are super-charged as if on some adrenaline kick.

The sequel takes place seven months later, as the title implies. Every country in the British Isles has been wiped out. However, the United States announces that the war against the virus is over and the countries are ready for reconstruction. The U.S. Army has established a presence and order in London, which is still under quarantine. Harold Perrineau (TV's *Lost*) stars as a Special Forces pilot who helps bring refugees back into the city. The problem is that one of them is still infected, and a new outbreak begins. Although the original cast doesn't return, the creative team does, including director Danny Boyle who returns in his new role as producer. ❧

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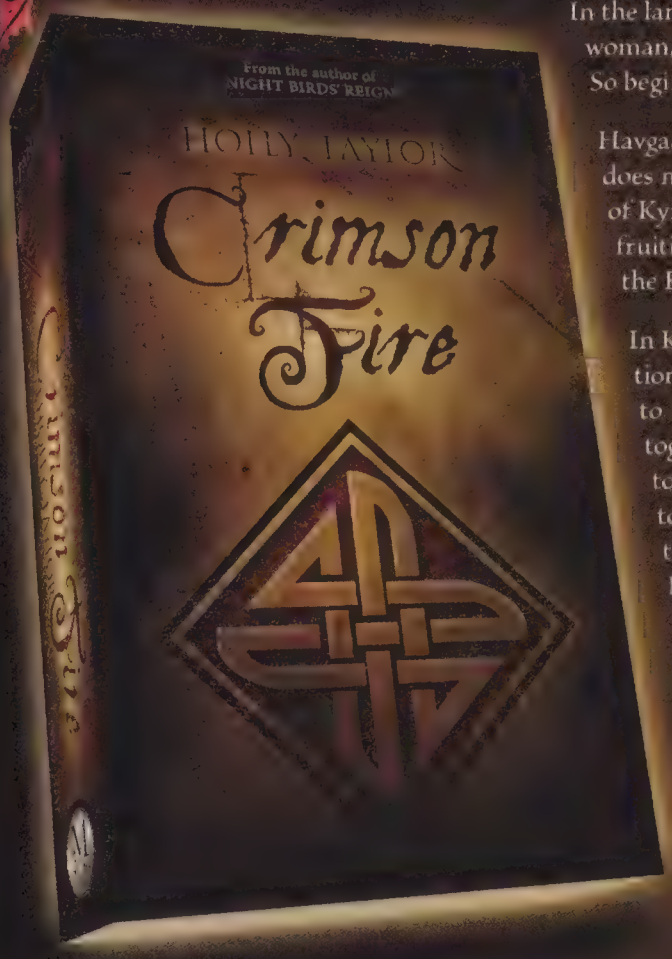

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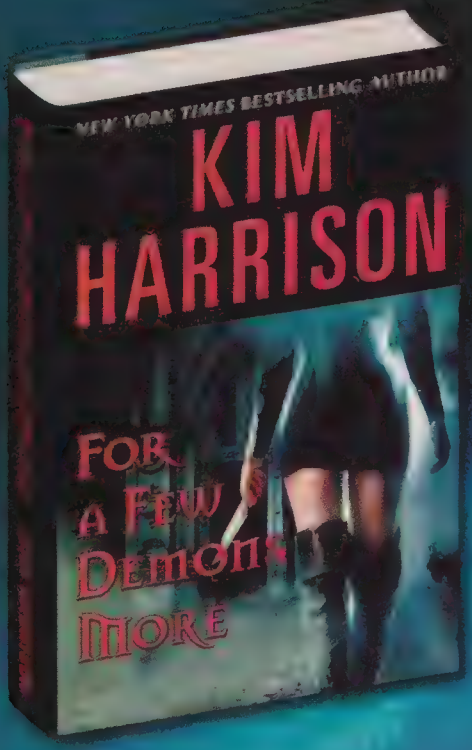

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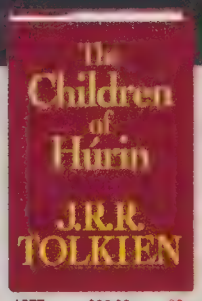

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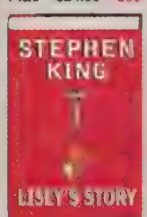

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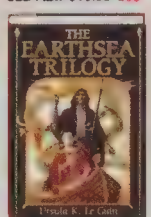

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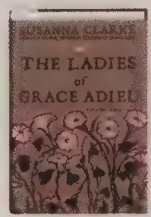

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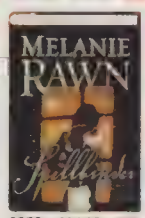

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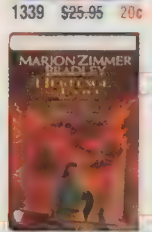

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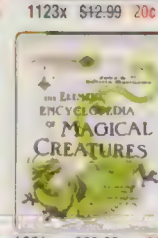

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THE POWER OF 3

CAPTAIN JACK, SPIDER-MAN, AND *SHREK* ARE BACK THIS SPRING!

In May, some of the most popular and profitable movie series in history are releasing third installments within weeks of each other.

Spider-Man 3 (Sony Pictures Entertainment) opens on May 4, and the main players return: director Sam Raimi, Tobey Maguire as Spider-Man/Peter Parker, Kirsten Dunst as Mary Jane Watson, and James Franco as Harry Osborn. According to *Premiere* magazine, the budget for Spider-Man 3 is in the neighborhood of a whopping $250 million. Each Spider-Man suit alone cost $30,000.

In this chapter of Peter Parker's life, he faces an abundance of villains. Harry Osborne becomes the New Goblin, and we meet Sandman (aka criminal Flint Marko played by Thomas Hayden Church of *Sideways* and TV's *Wings*) and Venom (aka newspaper photographer Eddie Brock played by Topher Grace of TV's *That 70s Show*). And then there's Spider-Man himself, who gives in to his dark side after being infected by an alien organism. On one hand, the infection increases his physical strength and powers. On the other hand, it weakens his emotional and moral strength. It even turns his Spider-Man suit black.

The story takes a dark turn when Peter Parker learns that he allowed the wrong man to die for his uncle's death. Letting the desire for vengeance overwhelm him, he searches for the man truly responsible. In the meantime, Harry's hot on the trail of Spider-Man, equally keen to avenge his own father's death. *Spider-Man 3* promises a wealth of interesting, complex characters and a strong story.

Shrek the Third (DreamWorks) is slated to hit theaters on May 18. When we last saw Shrek (Mike Meyers), he'd married Fiona (Cameron Diaz) and met the in-laws, King Harold (John Cleese) and Queen Lillian (Julie Andrews). In this movie, King Harold dies, which means Shrek and Fiona are next in line to rule the Kingdom of Far *Far Away*.

Artie (Justin Timberlake), a teen slacker. The original cast returns, including Eddie Murphy as Donkey and Antonio Banderas as Puss in Boots.

Finally, look for *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* on May 25 from Walt Disney Pictures. At the end of the second movie, Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) was betrayed by Elizabeth Swann (Keira Knightly) and handed over to Davy Jones (Bill Nighy), who has taken him to the world's end. Awash with remorse for the horrible deed she's done, Elizabeth revealed to Will her intent to go after Captain Jack and rescue him—with the help of his old nemesis, Captain Barbossa (Geoffrey Rush). All the stars return for the third installment, and they're joined by Rolling Stone guitarist Keith Richards. Depp has been candid about basing his portrayal of Captain Jack on Richards, and the filmmakers have long wanted to recruit the rock star. At long last, Richards makes an appearance in *At World's End* as Captain Jack's father. ❧

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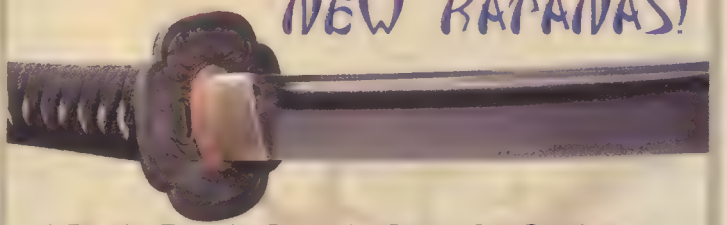

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The Owlglass and the Moon of Gold: Tyll Eulenspiegel and Kim Seon-dal

Every culture has its Trickster tales of both the animal and human variety. It's unfortunate that contemporary American children miss much of the performative storytelling tradition of the past, but even urbanites see figures like Bugs Bunny, whose anthropomorphism serves as a convenient interweaving of the two categories of animal and human. The traditional rabbit-as-Trickster (which those urbanites would see in the Disney rendition of Br'er Rabbit) combines with a sort of campy Groucho Marx figure in Bugs Bunny, providing stories that endure repeated engagement over the years. My 10-year-old nephew has just begun to notice some of the layered humor in the Warner Brothers cartoons, and he already refers back to his seven-year-old self as naive. Now he asks if Bugs is gay.)

H.P. Art Resource, NY

Kim Seon-dal, who may have been a real person living in the Chosun Dynasty, was a trickster who was preoccupied with food and his own well-being.

I spent most of my childhood years in Korea, hearing a great deal of the oral tradition from my storyteller uncles, so by the time I was exposed to figures like Bugs Bunny, I associated them with already familiar characters. Bugs was like the clever rabbit who tricked the Dragon King (who wanted to eat the poor rabbit's liver), or the kind rabbit who helped the hapless man put the hungry tiger back into the pit.

Animal stories are usually easier for purposes of comparison because the characters are quite distinctly iconic—they wear their symbolism and often the thematic qualities of the tales on their very skin, as it were. Human characters are a bit harder to compare because they require a more abstract engagement with theme and structure, but as we grow older, we generally gravitate (at least for a time) toward the human Tricksters because they appeal more to our developing "mature" sensibilities. I think this happens when our own sense of rebellion becomes conscious, when our acts of rebellion become willful, and when our knowledge of social rules and the consequences of transgression are more fully formulated than when we were children.

My father was a German in the U.S. Army, and I also heard stories from him on the occasions when I saw him as a child. It was not long before I began to notice parallels between the Korean and German tales, and since I was an Army brat, by my teenage years I had begun to appreciate antiauthoritarian gonzo Trickster characters like Hawkeye and Trapper in Altman's film version of *M*A*S*H*. My father was a sergeant whose job it was to uphold the authority of officers for whom he often had little or no respect. I could understand why he would have a special fondness for tales in which a marginal figure like Tyll Eulenspiegel would play scatological pranks on greedy innkeepers and prideful kings.

The two Tyll stories I remember best from my father's telling have to do with a certain kind of verbal or conceptual technicality—a playing with literal-mindedness and analogic thinking (to put it in abstract terms). The stories are quite simple.

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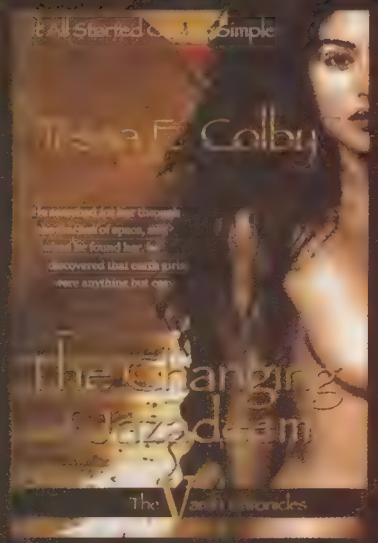

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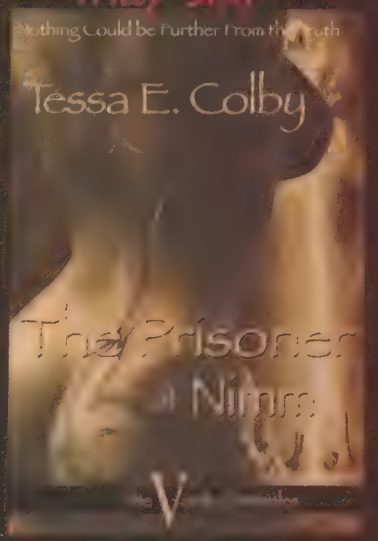

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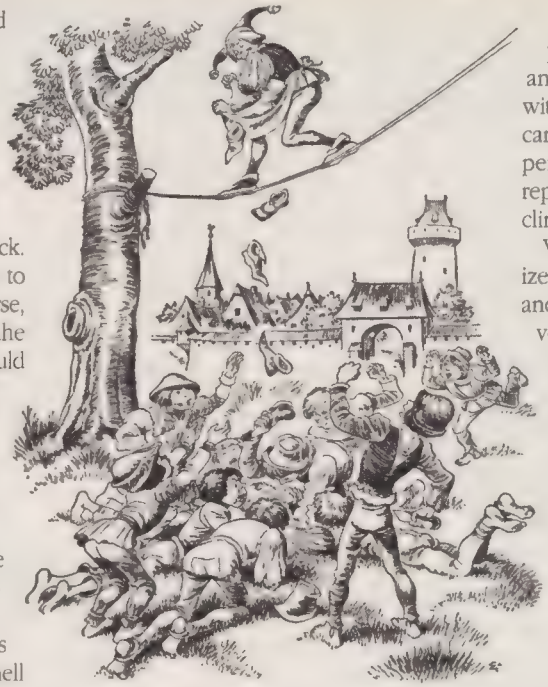
In the first, little Tyll, an accomplished acrobat, brags that he can walk a tightrope with the other kids' shoes. They, of course, know that it would be impossible, and so the neighborhood kids each bet him all their saved money and hand over their shoes. Tyll stuffs all the shoes in a large sack and then proceeds to walk the tightrope in his own shoes, carrying the sack. When he gets to the other side, he claims to have won the bet. "Pay up," he says. Of course, the children object. He did not walk the tightrope with their shoes. "I didn't say I would walk it in your shoes," he answers. "I said with your shoes. And I have. Pay up!" Now the children are angry and they refuse to pay. Tyll leaves the sack of shoes dangling from the tightrope, high above their heads out of their reach, and runs away.

In the second story, Tyll is traveling. (He is often traveling because he must continually run away from angry crowds!) He arrives at an inn, so hungry his stomach is rumbling, and he inhales the wonderful smell of roast meat. He asks the innkeeper how much for dinner, but learns that it is far too expensive for him. "Never mind," he says. "I'll just sit here and enjoy the smell." The innkeeper leaves him there for a while, but then, not wanting to miss a chance at earning some easy money, he returns and demands payment. "Although you have not eaten anything, you have enjoyed the smell of my cooking, and so you should pay a fair price," he says. Tyll obliges. He asks if a penny will do. "That's not much for the wonderful aroma of my roast, but it will do," says the innkeeper.



Tyll Eulenspiegel plays a trick on the neighborhood children, claiming he can walk a tightrope with their shoes—not in them.

Tyll makes a big show of opening his purse, removing the single penny from it, and dropping it into the innkeeper's purse with a loud *clink*. But before the innkeeper can close his purse, Tyll quickly removes the penny. When the innkeeper objects, he replies, "The smell of a roast is only worth the clink of a coin."

When I think back on these stories, I realize they must have helped me learn English and eventually do well on the analogies and verbal comprehension on my SATs. But at the time, I loved these stories because they were clever. Tyll, who initially seemed to be the gullible one in each case, had mentally outmaneuvered the profit-minded neighborhood kids and the innkeeper. He had outwitted them, duping them with their own delusion of cleverness.

The stories play with social and linguistic assumptions, illuminating us in the process.

No wonder Tyll's last name is Eulenspiegel, High German for "Owl Mirror," anglicized as "Owlglass." A pretty obvious insight: the wise owl who holds an enlightened mirror up to society. After a year of college German, I remember telling my father about my new appreciation for the meaning of Tyll's name, and he laughed at me. "That's exactly the sort of thing Eulenspiegel is making fun of," he said. "You college boys think-

Illustration by Fritz Eichenberg from *Tyll Ulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, by Moritz A. Jagendorf

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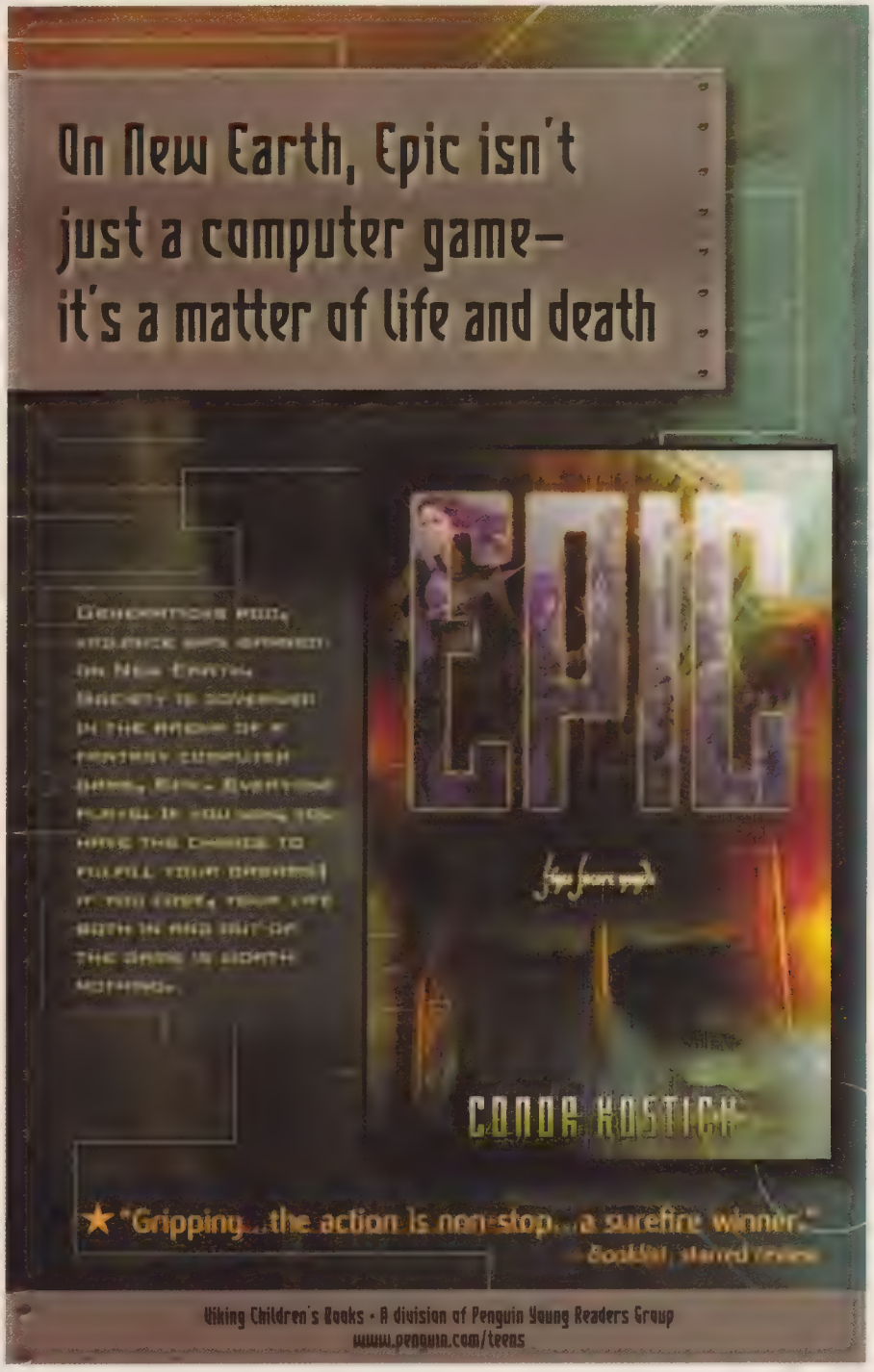
ing you know everything about everything." He told me that Tyll's name actually comes from the Low German (spoken by the common people) and that it is derived from *"u'ln Spegel,"* which means something like "Wipe-Ass." That rhymes better with the English "Owlglass,"and it also reiterates the theme of not taking one's assumptions for granted.

Lately, I have been doing Ezra Pound-like readings of Chinese characters as I finish my own collection of stories and poems called *Cathay*. Pound's 1915 *Cathay,* "translations" of T'ang Dynasty poems by Li Po, are undisputedly the finest in the English language, though they are technically inaccurate. He had been working with the notes of the Japanologist Ernest Fenollosa, who had developed an erroneous theory about the nature of the Chinese writing system. The idea that Chinese characters are ideograms that speak directly to the visual imagination has long been debunked by linguists, but for poets, and for scholars like me—who work with the layered associated meanings that come from interweaving visual and sound-based "reading"—it presents a more sophisticated theory of how conscious and unconscious features work together in oral and textual storytelling.

Korean happens to be a language that delights in visual and auditory wordplay. To be a literate Korean, one must not only learn the native phonetic alphabet (24 basic characters called *"han'gul"*), but also several thousand Chinese characters (called *"hanja"*) which are read with Korean pronunciations. In contemporary times, the trend has been to write the Chinese characters with their Korean phonetic counterparts, since it is hard, even for educated people, to remember so many *hanja*. (North Korea, to increase general literacy, uses no Chinese characters at all.)

Korean, which borrowed much of its vocabulary from Chinese in ancient times, is full of sound-alike words, or homophones. In Chinese, homophones are helpfully distinguished by different tones, but since Korean lost its tones long ago, it has many homophones that lend themselves to layered meanings. Written in Chinese, the words that sound like *"Cheon Ma"* might clearly say "1,000 Horses," but if one writes them in the Korean alphabet and takes them out of context, they might just as well be "Blue Demon," "1,000 Yards of Cloth," or "Heavenly Horse," to name a few. This might seem highly problematic, but it is generally not, because the context of the words clarifies meaning in almost every case (otherwise. North Koreans would have terrible problems with written communication even if they have, according to demographic information, the highest literacy rate in the world).

The nature of homophones actually makes Korean a language especially suited for the layering of poetic meanings. And this is why I have begun to suspect that there is a Korean borrowing of Tyll Eulenspiegel. It is a speculation at the moment, so let me begin with a story that will provide obvious thematic par-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allels. The following is Ty Pak's retelling of a traditional Kim Seon-dal story from his forthcoming book, *A Korean Decameron.*

Kim Seon-dal Extracts Confessions

Lacking inheritance or industry, Kim Seon-dal lived by his wits. Seldom was his rice container full, and he and his mother were often reduced to utter poverty.

But Seon-dal's genius always contrived a way out, and to say that they did not starve is an understatement. As a matter of fact, they were quite well off. If there was nothing special to do, Seon-dal spent most of his time sleeping. He never worried about where his next meal was coming from.

A few days before the eighth day of the fourth moon, the birthday of the Shakyamuni Buddha, Seon-dal thought it was time he toured the Myohyang Mountains, the place where Tan'gun, the mythical founder of Korea, was believed to have descended from Heaven. It was believed that any person who wanted to have a good afterlife must visit the Myohyang Mountains. Seon-dal was, of course, not inspired by any religious motives. He simply thought that his claims to being a knowledgeable, wise man would be grossly unfounded if he had not seen the beautiful scenery of the place.

From *The Merry Pranks of Till Eulenspiegel* by Heinz Janisch

Till Eulenspiegel convinces a local farmer that green cloth is actually blue, thus gaining a warm coat for the winter, in this illustration by Lisbeth Zwerger.

But Seon-dal had no idea where he was to get the money and supplies necessary for the trip. After considering his problem briefly, he had an idea. He repaired to the village, his house being a little way isolated from it. He went first to Kaettong's house and looked for the housewife.

"Hello, mother. You always wanted to go to the Myohyang Mountains. Here is a splendid chance," he said.

"When are you going?" asked Kaettong's mother.

"The eighth of the month."

"Who is going?"

"I and several others."

Kaettong's mother agreed to go also. Next, Seon-dal went to the father of the One-eyed Boy and asked if he would go to the mountains. This time Seon-dal was more specific and named a few who were going. The man agreed to go, too.

Seon-dal went from house to house, mostly those of wealthy people, telling in his shrewd way how essential it was to see the Myohyang Mountains. He succeeded in organizing an impressive group. Each of the participants was urged to bring rice, bedding, and money.

The eighth day came and the village buzzed with excitement. After numbering and lining up the group in military fashion, Seon-dal assumed its leadership. He was in extremely good humor, talking in friendly terms with everyone. But it was particularly noticeable that he was traveling light, carrying none of the items the others had been told to bring.

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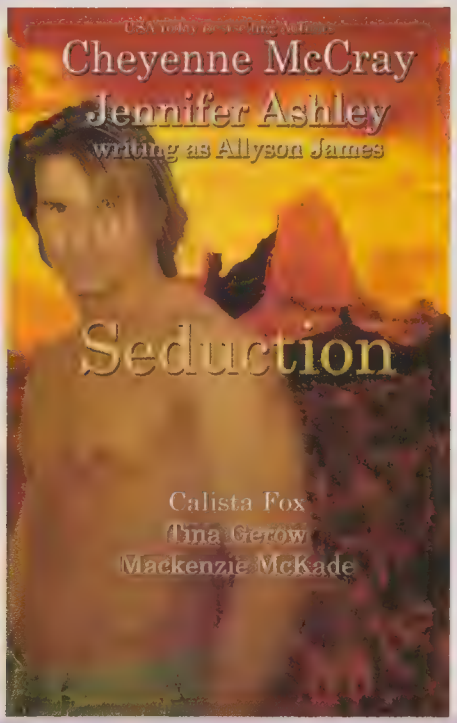


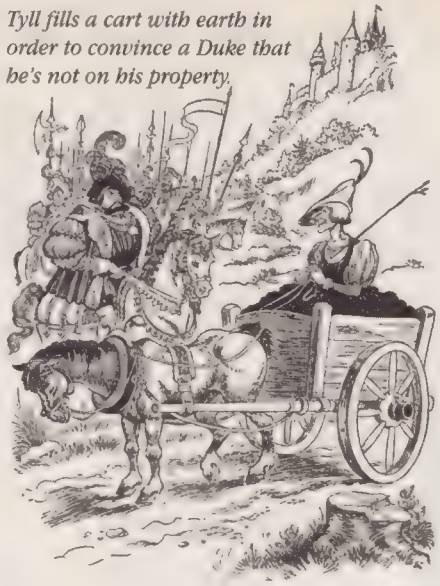
The group stopped at the foot of the mountains to spend the night. Early the next morning, they set out again and around noon arrived at the Temple of Universal Wisdom, situated at about the knee of the hills. After lunch they started out, this time guided by a trail guide who was obtained through Seon-dal's contacts with the Temple.

They climbed and climbed and finally reached the toe of the Myohyang Mountains, a rocky cliff which was the most difficult of all climbs in the whole area. Everybody, man and woman, old and young, was so out of breath that some screamed and called for help.

Seon-dal was also feeling the effects of the rugged, uphill climb, but his nature was not one to permit him to admit weakness. On the contrary, his resourceful mind worked out a marvelous scheme and he immediately sought to put it into practice. He asked the guide to go up first, saying that he would lead the group up the cliff in good time. The guide went ahead, glad to be relieved of his responsibilities.

Seon-dal suddenly went down on his knees and began calling on the sacred name of the god of the mountains.

"Holy Lord, I sinned with a female dog when I was seven. I pried into the private parts of my aunt while she was visiting and taking a nap at my house when I was fourteen. I stole an ox from a neighbor, killed it, and ate the meat for six months ..." So went



Tyll fills a cart with earth in order to convince a Duke that he's not on his property.

on the penitent Seon-dal, while his fellow travelers looked on, unable to figure out what their leader was doing.

At last Seon-dal's confession came to an end and, calmly rising, he rejoined the group. "I almost forgot," he said. "The Abbot of the Temple told me that a sinner cannot pass this rock without confessing all his sins to the god of the mountains. Many have died for omitting this ritual. I am sure none of you are sinners." Seon-dal paused, waiting for a response. "But if any of you are, better come forward and do as I did."

Nobody stirred. "Well then, we will have no casualty, I suppose. Let's go."

"Just a minute," said Kaettong's mother. "I must confess."

Seon-dal motioned her close to the rock. The devout woman kneeled beside Seon-dal, away from the rest.

"God of the mountains, forgive and permit me to pass unharmed."

"But you must tell him your sins before asking for forgiveness," Seondal reminded her.

"I am coming round to that," retorted the woman, sharply. Then, correcting herself, she faced the rock and said, "Something came over me last spring and I sinned with Yang Sobang from a nearby village."

"But the god will not understand unless you tell him exactly how."

"First, it was in the mulberry field when I was picking the leaves. Three times after that at his guard lodge in the melon field."

"I think that'll do. Go and join the rest." Seon-dal then addressed the group as a whole. "Is there nobody else?"

"Aye," volunteered the father of the One-eyed Boy. "I have done nothing too bad in my life, but once I stole a pile of rice sheaves from Chief Kim's field, which is adjacent to mine."

Next came the daughter-in-law of Chief Kim, who was the wealthiest man in the village. "I deserve death. When I was fifteen, before I married, there was in my house a

Illustration by Fritz Eichenberg from *Tyll Ulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, by Moritz A. Jagendorf

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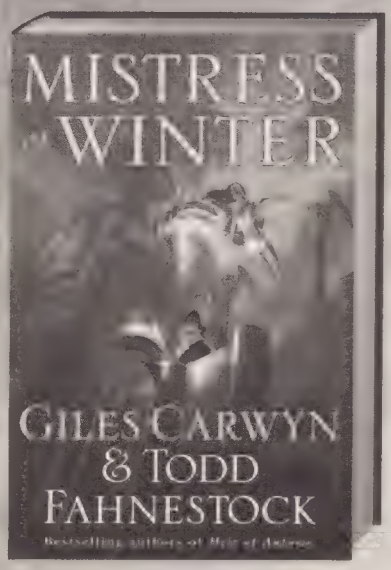

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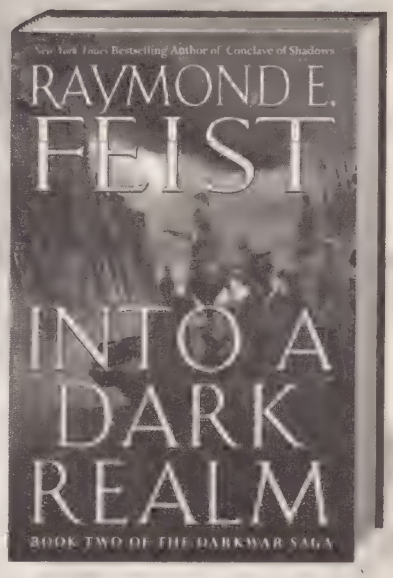

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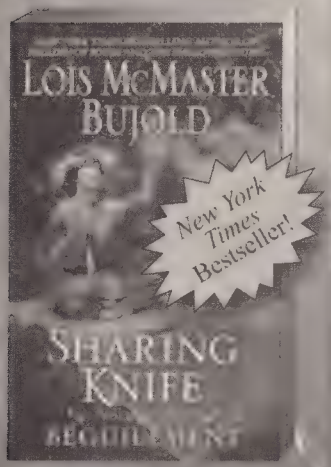

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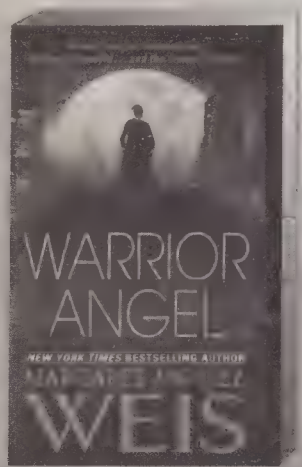

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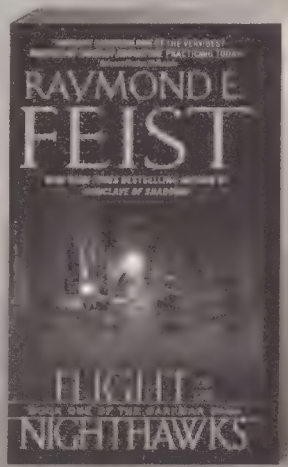

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farmhand. One day, when there was nobody in the house, he took me to the granary and did that to me."

So the train of confessioners came forward in an unbroken chain and told the unsoliciting Seon-dal all their lifelong secrets. Seon-dal's heart glowed with pleasure.

At last, the ceremonies came to an end and the group began hiking with confidence. They stayed a few days in the Myohyang Mountains viewing the scenery, and all came home safely. The tour was a great success.

Soon, Seon-dal's grain-container again saw the bottom. His mother worried about the next meal.

"Well, Mother, give me a big bag and I'll get you rice."

"But how?"

"Never mind. Just give me the bag."

Seon-dal went to Kaettong's mother. "Give me two bushels of rice," he said.

"You already borrowed two pecks. I will not give you more until you pay your debt," she said.

"I have no rice. I cannot repay you."

"I don't want to listen. No more rice." She turned her back on Seon-dal.

"If you really mean it," Seon-dal began, "where is Kaettong's father? You will regret it."

"Regret it? Do you think he is more generous? Go to him and learn for yourself. He is down in the field."

"Thank you. I will have a chat or two with

Like Tyll, Kim Seon-dal comes from humble beginnings and has the ability to con people by playing to their own self-interest.

him about Mr. Yang from the next village," Seon-dal said as he slowly sauntered out.

The woman's face changed instantly. She ran after him and caught his sleeve. "Now listen, I did not mean that. Come, I will give you a bushel-and-a-half."

Seon-dal reluctantly gave way.

After a few days, Seon-dal knew where to go next, and for more than a year he did not have to worry about his food.

There are numerous human Trickster-themed stories in Korean folklore and most of them have a similar structure. Some are also attributed to various pseudo-historical figures in the same way that Tyll Eulenspiegel is said to have been a real person who was born near Brunswick in 1300 and died in Mölln fifty years later. Kim Seon-dal, whose name is the surname "Kim" and the official title "Seon-dal," is often said to have been a real person who lived sometime during the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910), though stories connected to him are often linked to other local and regional figures

In the story on the previous page, one could easily replace Kim with Tyll. They have the same humble origin, the same concern for their own material well-being, the same preoccupation with food, the same ability to con people by playing to their own self-interest (which is usually hypocritical). There is even a scatological allusion in the name of Kaettong's mother, in keeping with the popularity of scatological themes in the Eulenspiegel tales (and in both German and Korean folklore in general). One could make a good argument for how Korea's Kim might actually be derived from Tyll Eulenspiegel based on dates and the likelihood of transmission.

The first book of Tyll Eulenspiegel stories, *An Entertaining Book About Till Eulenspiegel from the Land of Brunswick* (attributed to Hermann Bote) was published in the early 1500s. The first Jesuit missionary, Father Gregorious de Cespedes, arrived in Korea in 1593 (and though his mission failed terribly, Catholicism did establish itself in Korea by the late 1700s). The Jesuits were very active in translating works both to and from Korean. They also did a great deal of comparative work in folklore and literature for the purpose of better understanding the local language and culture, and so it is not implausible to think that Eulenspiegel stories might have been told to Koreans by Jesuits and then taken on a life of their own, merging with local traditions.

I am compelled in this direction because of the names. Eulenspiegel—"Owl Mirror" with the hidden meaning of "Wipe Ass" under its surface—has striking parallels to the name Kim Seon-dal. Since "Seon-dal" is a title, the name has the same generic resonance as "Gentleman Jones," but when one looks at the potential meanings layered in the sound value of the three syllables in the name, some interesting features emerge.

KIM is one of the three most common Korean surnames (they say if you throw a stone into a Korean crowd, it will hit a Kim, Lee, or Park). The Chinese character for the surname can be read as either "Gold" or "Metal." The characters SEON and DAL together form a title, but taken separately, SEON can be read as "Enlightenment" (as in Zen) or "Goodness." DAL is a native Korean word for "Moon." In Asian cosmology, it is understood that the moon reflects the sun—it is a mirror.

Note how the "Enlightenment" reading of SEON parallels the "Owl" in Eulenspiegel and how the "Moon" reading of DAL parallels the "Mirror," both being reflective and circular. In some parts of Korea, SEON, with its short O sound, is pronounced in a way that sounds like the Korean word for hand, which sounds like "*sone*" (hand) with a long O sound.

The symbolism in drawings of Tyll Eulenspiegel generally shows the mirror as a small hand mirror. Sometimes the owl is holding the mirror and looking at itself. In old Korea, hand mirrors of this type were made of metal—bronze or copper. Perhaps very wealthy persons might have afforded ones made of gold, but that might have made them the target of a Kim Seon-dal prank.

Like Tyll Eulenspiegel's, Kim's figurative mirror reflects something obvious we might otherwise not want to see: our individual and collective shortcomings in all their irony. Other cultures have similar figures with similarly charged names: Mullah Nasreddin found in medieval Islamic tales (also known as Nasruddin Hodja) and Hershele Ostropoler of 19th-century Jewish lore. All of these Trickster figures show the contradictions and the tensions between categories like rich and poor, high and low, virtuous and vile, educated and ignorant; they incorporate pathos and bathos in ways that not only reflect, but illuminate the human condition. If we study these Trickster figures—if we understand and appreciate the layers of meaning in their stories—their antics become our education. ❧

Further Reading

- For Tyll Eulenspiegel stories, I recommend Moritz A. Jagendorf's collection of 37 tales (with both full-page and spot illustrations beautifully rendered by Fritz Eichenberg).
- Two scatological Tyll Eulenspiegel stories can be found on D.L. Ashliman's Folktexts website, "a library of folktales, folklore, fairy tales, and mythology": www.pitt.edu/~dash/ fart.html#furrier
- Other Kim Seon-dal stories can be found in Ty Pak's *A Korean Decameron: A Collection of Tales from the Yi Dynasty*, available in the spring, 2007 from Bo-Leaf Books
- Fantasy fiction inspired by Trickster tales can be found in *The Coyote Road*, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, available in June 2007 from Viking Press.
- The transcript of a Mythic Journeys Conference discussion of Trickster and other Transgressive characters in folklore (panelists: William F. Doty, Heinz Insu Fenkl, Kristen McDermott, Terri Windling) can be found in the Mythic Passages webzine:www.mythicjourneys.org/newsletter_oct06_transgression.html

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

Night Shade gives readers another chance to savor the genius of Clark Ashton Smith.

It's not that Clark Ashton Smith has lacked for enduring devotion from fellow authors and specialist publishers in the fantasy field. Howard Phillips Lovecraft, a fellow regular in the pulpy pages of *Weird Tales,* "The Unique Magazine," was awed by his work and clearly regarded him as a peer and August Derleth, the creator and editor of Arkham House, many times put his work between hard covers and championed him enthusiastically and untiringly. He has also always had legions of affectionate fans. and admirers, a number of whom made difficult pilgrimages to his cabin tucked away located in rocky California mining country and there's a touching story concerning such a trek which I've always loved: a group of fans rattled higher and higher in their Model "T" Ford up the steep hills, following the directions on a map Smith had drawn for them, when they were stopped by an unmarked fork in the road. They looked higher up and saw a tall, thin man making his way down the mountain in their direction carrying a sign reading CLARK ASHTON SMITH with an arrow pointing directly at him and then, with deep love in their hearts, they watched him plant it plant it carefully into the ground at the fork before he looked up to see them and smile and wave.

Courtesy of Peter Ferguson; http://ww3.sympatico.ca/uberpete

Artist Peter Ferguson created this scary, but ultimately friendly dragon for the cover of Dragon Slippers, *which is reviewed in this issue's YA column.*

But though he has always been beloved by the few he has never managed to achieve anything remotely like the fame of such as Lovecraft and other *Weird Tales* authors in spite of endless deeply sincere attempts of loving admirers to put up a sign pointing to CLARK ASHTON SMITH which will somehow finally point him out to the small world at large.

And here is ***The End of the Story; Volume One of the Collected Fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith*** (edited by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger, Night Shade Books, San Francisco, CA, trade hardcover, $39.95), yet another heroic directing of the reading public's attention to the works of Smith in hopes that this time, finally, the peculiar genius of this persistently ignored master of fantasy might at last get the attention it has so very long deserved.

The five-book series strategy was hit upon by Scott Connors, Ron Hilger, and the brave folk at Night Shade Books. The notion is to make every one of his imaginative works available chronologically, as he wrote them, not as they were printed because, oftentimes, his writings languished for varying periods of time, mostly because they alarmed or baffled the editors he submitted them to and it took a while for them to either pull together enough courage to do so or to persuade Smith to "improve" the story until they deemed it pleasing to their readers and/or fit to print. Printing the tales in order of their creation is a marvelous way to introduce him as you see his powers grow and blossom.

Another excellent feature of this series is that the editors have gone to great lengths to dig up and compare all available versions of each story in order to restore them to the form which Smith had hoped to put before his readers and—very importantly to those interested in such things—they have not only been generous enough to include "A Note on the Texts" explaining how they arrived at these restorations, but they have given further details about their restorations in the appendices of this book and, presumably, they'll continue this courtesy in all the ones to follow.

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NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

Into the Wild, by Sarah Beth Durst, Razorbill, June 2007. Julie Marchen doesn't lead a normal life. Her mother is Rapunzel, her adopted brother is Puss in Boots, her grandmother is a witch, and the enigmatic force known as the Wild, which was the dominating force behind the fairy tales of old, lives under her bed, just waiting for a chance to break free. But as long as the Wild remains quiescent, its former victims are free of the tales they once inhabited. And then someone makes a wish, and the Wild is free to devour the world. Now Julie is the only one capable of traveling into the Wild to once again defeat it. In the process she'll finally understand what happened to her father, the fateful decisions her mother made, and why she's uniquely qualified to undertake this quest. *Into the Wild* is an entertaining, introspective, clever remixing of traditional fairy tales with a Labyrinth edge and a self-aware sensibility, and it signals a strong debut from Sarah Beth Durst.

Wildwood Dancing, by Juliet Marillier, Knopf, January 2007. Set against the backdrop of traditional Transylvania, *Wildwood Dancing* is the story of five sisters who, every month at the full moon, travel through a magical portal into a realm where they mingle with the folk of the Other Kingdom, dancing and chatting with all manner of mythic creatures. But then the deadly Night People visit the revels one month, and eldest sister Tati falls in love with one of them. Then the girls' father is forced to travel far away for his health, and their domineering cousin Cezar comes to power in the area, threatening to crush their dreams and wills. Can the girls, led by strong-willed Jenica, find what it takes to save the Other Kingdom from Cezar's dark dreams of revenge, rescue Tati from imminent death, unravel the secrets of a powerful witch, and live happily ever after? Incorporating elements of the Frog Prince, Twelve Princesses Dancing, and traditional Transylvanian myth, this is a beautiful, intricate story about growing up, finding love, and discovering one's inner strengths, and I highly recommend it.

Tattoo, by Jennifer Lynn Barnes, Delacorte Press, January 2007. Four friends—sensible Bailey, fashionable Delia, intellectual Annabelle, and tomboy Zo—are granted amazing powers through the application of magical temporary tattoos, and given a deadline— three days—to defeat the dark plans of an ancient evil before it can wreak unimaginable havoc. With pyrokinesis, transmogrification, telepathy, and precognition at their disposal, as well as Delia's keen fashion sense, can the four figure things out in time to save the day, or will the school dance be memorable for all the wrong reasons? *Tattoo* mixes Greek and Celtic myth to deliver a fast-paced, enjoyable adventure with a believable voice and a likable cast of heroines. I'm looking forward to the next in the series.

Dragon Slippers, by Jessica Day George, Bloomsbury, May 2007. Creel survives her aunt's get-rich-quick scheme when she outwits the dragon that was supposed to eat her, and wins a pair of fine slippers out of the dragon's hoard in the process. Taking up a new life in the city of King's Seat, she pursues her dream as a dressmaker, but soon gets caught up in apprentice politics, a potential romance, and a war brewing with a neighboring country. Ultimately, her friendship with dragons, and the hidden power of her newfound slippers prove to be crucial in the days that follow, with everything riding upon her strength of character and quick wits. *Dragon Slippers* is an excellent debut that provides a whole new twist on some old themes, with a delightful heroine and a fun premise. Definitely worth checking out.

Evil Genius, by Catherine Jinks, Harcourt, June 2007. Cadel Piggott has always been smarter than everyone around him, undertaking acts of calculated chaos and revenge, first out of idle curiosity, and later encouraged by his therapist. When he discovers his true nature as the only son of evil genius Dr. Phineas Darkkon, and begins his studies at the secret Axis Institute for World Domination, he figures he's found his true calling. Then people start dying and/or disappearing, and Cadel's forced to reexamine his entire life and morality. Does he have what it takes to live up to his full potential and his father's expectations? *Evil Genius* is a fascinating examination of good versus evil in a world where nothing is black and white, and no one is what they appear to be. Jenks really delves into what it takes to be the bad guy, in a refreshingly different, highly compelling tale.

Dragonfrigate Wizard Halcyon Blithe, by James M. Ward, Tor, December 2006. Halcyon Blithe is back in another exciting story of adventure and magic on the high seas, in this sequel to *Midshipwizard Halcyon Blithe*. This time around, he helps to capture an enemy demonship, before being assigned as part of a diplomatic mission aboard a dwarven dragonship, a posting which will truly test the young officer more than ever before. He'll engage in deadly combat between ships, deal with rivals, enjoy the first bloom of romance, and learn more about what it means to be an officer in the navy, and that's before they reach their ultimate destination and the stakes are raised even higher. Horatio Hornblower meets all the trappings of fantasy in this enjoyable new entry in a splendid series.

The Scarlet Letterman, by Cara Lockwood, MTV Books, January 2007. Miranda Tate's back for her second semester at Bard Academy, where delinquent teens are taught by dead literary figures posing as real teachers. Can Miranda juggle two romances, one involving a young Heathcliff, while investigating the intertwined mysteries of a strange stalker and disappearing faculty members? Will she make it to the big dance before a tiger eats her? This sequel to Wuthering High once again offers up a clever blend of literary ghost story and teen drama, making for an intriguing tale.

The Faerie Path, by Frewin Jones, Eos, January 2007. Sixteen-year-old Anita Palmer has a perfectly pleasant life, with a boyfriend she adores, and a starring role in the upcoming school play. Unfortunately, everything is thrown into disarray when she's suddenly catapulted into Faerie, where she discovers she's actually a Faerie princess who's been missing for five hundred years. Now she has to unravel the mysteries of her past and foil a dangerous enemy, before she loses everything she cares for. A charming start to a new series, with a pleasantly stubborn protagonist, The Faerie Path makes for a fun read. ❧

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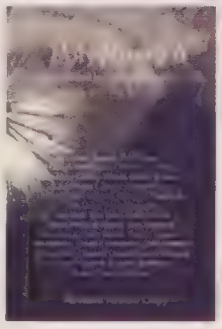
The End of the Story starts off with an affectionate and intelligent introduction by no less a fellow fantasist than Ramsey Campbell. It's full of the insights of a fellow professional as when he points out that the rough editorial handling of "A Night in Malneant," one of Smith's most dark and dreamily Poe-like excursions, may well have caused him to retreat into tried and true pulp Western tropes in his next story: "The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake." He does the reader a great favor by stressing the terrific importance of being sure to pay full attention when he or she reads a Clark Ashton Smith story.



Actually, I would like to expand on that theme. Having reread a number of these stories for the purpose of writing this review, and because I could not resist doing so, I was reminded once again of how easy it is to glide through Smith's prose like a soaring bird since it's so smoothly written and thereby miss paying close enough attention to amazing amounts of what he's written.

I have a good visual imagination and it's well practiced since the use of it's a large part of how I make my living, but I have noticed that if I do not watch myself carefully in reading C.A.S.'s work it's very easy for the gliding effect mentioned above to kick in and all sorts of spectacular sights will be missed. So be warned: Pay full conscious attention to him when he describes a costume or a bit of architecture or the anatomy of some alien being or the absurd intricacies of some fantastic scientific device. Take time to follow his thoughtful instruction and build it with your own mind's eye and really take a look at what the two of you have done or you may miss seeing all sorts of wonderful stuff and fail to properly observe many subtleties of the world Smith so lovingly presents—that would be a serious loss.

This book (and the series to come) will not only present a marvelous introduction to those only slightly familiar or entirely unfamiliar to the wonderful work of Clark Ashton Smith, they'll be a treat to those well acquainted with Smith's writing. It's a marvelous display of the richness of Smith's work and I do hope this time it will seriously expand his audience into something like the size it ought to be. If you have not been a member up to now, this is a fine opportunity to join it.

The Further Adventures of Beowulf, Champion of Middle Earth (edited by Brian M. Thomsen, Carroll & Graff, New York, trade paperback, $14.95) is a pleasantly different and highly entertaining variation on the anthology format that is firmly but very wittily based on *The Deeds of Beowulf*, an ancient epic of Western heroism of which you have likely heard some rumor, and is loomed over throughout its pages by the formidable presence of dear old J.R.R. Tolkien, who was not only the creator of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy but a scholar who used his formidable influence to prod critics of all stripes into so seriously reconsidering and revising their opinions of the above-mentioned *Deeds of Beowulf* that its artistic reputation has permanently soared and become one of the most influential fantastical imaginings of our era.

The book, which is subtly tongue in cheek throughout, starts with an essay drolly entitled "... but first, a few words of introduction ..." which is a fine crash course for anyone who is interested in creating the impression at parties or fantasy conventions that he or she really knows something about J.R.R.T. since, having read it, you will be able to explain to awed listeners why it's called Middle Earth [hint: "Middel-erd" is the Middle English version of the Norse/German/etc. word for our part of the universe as it was conceived of by those believing we were located dead center in the giant cosmic tree called Ygdrasil right between (lots of middles here!) Valhalla just over our heads and Hell just under our feet] and does a fine job of showing how the industrious Christian reshaping of Pagan legends and beliefs in the Middle Ages into something a little less dangerous has led us straight to our most contemporary and up-to-date sagas of Swords and Sorcery.

The introduction is followed by a very readable and easily understandable prose translation of *The Deeds of Beowulf* itself so that the unscholarly reader can have a direct exposure to the great legend as 'twas presented to eighth-century readers and something like the same experience. If you give it your full attention, it's worth the price of the book in itself.

After the translation the anthologist presents the first of four interludes that alternate with the four stories by four authors that are based on and attempt to fill in some of the gaps in the epic of Beowulf. They are all presented under the title of "Beowulf and the Master of His Critics" and they are strange and quite fascinating as they pretend to let the reader eavesdrop on a teaching meeting between Tolkien, the Oxford don, and none other than the spy, Guy Burgess, who has hired Tolkien to read the stories in the anthology and to comment on them. I have no idea if the four authors who contributed the stories knew this was going to be part of the structure of the anthology but I do know that if I had been asked to contribute and been told that this was what my stories would be facing, I'd have entered the fray with considerable trepidation!

I personally found the four stories to be a lot of fun and very much enjoyed watching each author create and/or select a monster or monsters appropriate to Beowulf's period and mythos and then have a fine old time skillfully pitting him against these varied menaces and let the brave old hero strut his stuff. I suspect that you will too, especially when they are set against a background as odd and interesting as this anthology and wouldn't be all that surprised if you aren't stimulated by all of it enough to follow up on the fascinating bibliography at the end of the book, "The Beowulf Canon Through Today" which not only points you to old and new translations but guides you toward all sorts of spinoffs including movies, music, and a sizable section on graphic novels.

Every so often I like to draw attention to and put in a good word for a magazine or other project I think might be enjoyed by the readers of *Realms of Fantasy*. Since we were just speaking of Beowulf it seems a fine time to mention an excellent and very well produced little magazine called ***The Cimmerian*** which is devoted mainly to the stories of Conan, a true descendent of Beowulf if ever there was one, and his creator, Robert E. Howard.

One aspect of the magazine I particularly enjoy is the inclusion of considerable visual material, photos of authors and editors and such in their environments, pages of typewritten manuscripts, maps, and little explanatory charts drawn by the creators of worlds in an attempt to make even clearer other worlds than our own.

There is also a continuingly successful effort to bring in a wide variety of artists to illustrate the magazine and the whole level of quality of their layout is quite remarkable. They can be reached at *www.thecimmerian.com* if you're interested.

Gahan Wilson

Polyphony 6, edited by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake, Wheatland Press, trade paperback, 336 pp., $18.95, ISBN: 0-9755903-4-0.

The latest installment of this World Fantasy Award-nominated anthology series from editors Deborah Layne and Jay Lake continues the tradition of its predecessors in its wide-ranging scope, high literary quality, and mix of established and beginning writers. It's a must read for anyone who likes their speculative fiction seasoned with the surreal and the experimental. Here are two of my favorites.

Ray Vukcevich's "The Library of Pi" mixes a mathematical paradox, the so-called "pi is normal conjecture," which posits that the digits of pi behave like uniform random numbers in their infinite progression, with a Borgesian conceit (perhaps first set forth by Martin Gardner via his fictitious Dr. Matrix) "that everything that can be expressed is expressed somewhere in the digits of pi," and comes up with a strange and moving allegory of an Alternate America that has progressed a bit farther down the road to homegrown facism than our own.

In a more realistic vein, "Orange Groves Out to the Horizon," by Richard Wadholm, features a jarring collision between the death-and-ter-

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Sylvia Day

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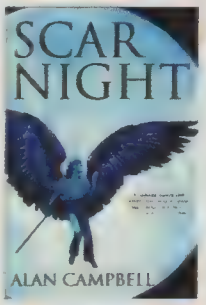
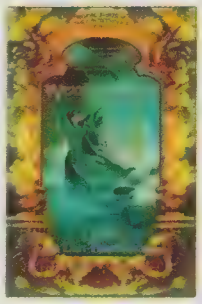
rorism-drenched present and the perhaps more innocent 1960s, with its equivalently naïve dreams of brave new worlds waiting in inner- and outer-space. The story is a quiet, hopeful gem.

Scar Night, The Deepgate Codex: Volume I, by Alan Campbell, Bantam Spectra, New York, hardcover, 432 pp., $22.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-38416-1.





I was apprehensive upon learning that Alan Campbell had been a programmer and designer of the mega-successful *Grand Theft Auto* computer game. Certainly the setup of Scar Night, a city suspended by a vast network of immense iron chains over an abyss whose depths are inhabited by an army of the dead determined to force open the gates of heaven, is a mouth-watering gaming premise. Who wouldn't want to play Scar Night: The Game? But it's awfully hard to play a novel.

Luckily, though he puts his game-design experience to good use when it comes to fashioning his baroque back story, Campbell brings his first novel, which Paul Di Filippo has astutely termed "second-generation New Weird," vividly to life.

The chained city is called Deepgate, and it has existed for thousands of years, built by angels who followed the angel Ulcis in a rebellion against the goddess Ayen that resulted in their being cast out of heaven. When Ulcis fell, Ayen barred the gates of heaven not only to him and his followers, but to the souls of mortal humans as well. Now, when a mortal dies, the body must be sanctified by the Church of Ulcis and dropped into the abyss, at whose nethermost point Ulcis dwells, gathering an army of the dead for a fresh assault on heaven. Blood is the repository of the soul, and the fallen angels may achieve a kind of immortality through it, dying and living again with each soul-draught. Bodies whose blood is scattered or lost, or that are unsanctified by the Church, are thought to draw the attention of a mysterious dark entity known as Iril, the Maze of Blood—Campbell seems to be setting Iril up for a greater role in the next volume; here the creature is invoked with superstitious dread but never seen.

Deepgate is a mix of Dickens's London, Peake's Gormenghast, and Miéville's Bas-Lag. It is an enervated city, sunk in decay and corruption, though also possessing a febrile energy. The chains that hold it suspended over the abyss are rusting and disintegrating, so that entire sections are apt to suddenly plunge into the pit. The city is menaced from without by apostate barbarians, kept at bay by means of poisons devised by the Arch Chemist and Poisoner, Alexander Devon, a twisted man who is a victim of his own nefarious research, and from within by a rogue angel known as Carnival, who once a month murders and drinks the blood of an innocent victim in order to prolong a life that has already lasted over 2,000 years.

Sixteen-year-old Dill is the last of a long and illustrious line of winged Battle-archons that have protected the city; but he is a mere shadow of his ancestors, forbidden even to fly. Now it is time, or past time, for him to assume his responsibilities, and a young girl, Rachel, a Church assassin who by night hunts for Carnival, is assigned to tutor him in the ways of battle. An unlikely friendship is forged that will lead these two, as well as Carnival, into the depths of the abyss, where they will encounter a truth that will shred their faith to ribbons.

Campbell braids his various plotlines dexterously, albeit somewhat statically, like a series of freeze-frames, drawing them together in a violent climax that left me wondering how he could possibly top himself ... but eager to see him try.

Flora Segunda, Ysabeau S. Wilce, Harcourt Children's Books, New York, hardcover, 448 pp., $17.00, ISBN: 978-0-15-205433-5.

The full title of this extraordinarily original and assured debut is *Flora Segunda, Being the Magickal Mishaps of a Girl of Spirit, Her Glass-Gazing Sidekick, Two Ominous Butlers (One Blue), a House of Eleven Thousand Rooms, and a Red Dog.* This suggests, but only suggests, the delirious riot of imaginative fecundity romping through the first installment of Wilce's Califa trilogy, and gives not a hint at all of the sober, indeed often grim, family history that underpins the antic adventures of (soon to be) 14-year-old Flora Nemain Fyrdraaca ov Fyrdraaca, aka the eponymous Flora Segunda, who is also our spirited narrator.

"Segunda" because the first Flora was lost years earlier under mysterious but dire circumstances by Reverdy Anacreon Fyrdraaca ov Fyrdraaca, better known as Hotspur, and still better known as Poppy, her father, and the father of our Flora as well. This tragedy occurred in Anahuatl City, capital of the bloodthirsty but magically potent Huitzil empire, where Poppy was tortured into a shell of his former self by the "Birdies," as the Huitzil are privately referred to by the citizenry of Califa. Released after a somewhat shameful peace negotiated by the mother of the two Floras, Juliet Buchanan Fyrdraaca ov Fyrdraaca, better known as Buck, Poppy is now a drunken, violent, more than half-mad wreck who inhabits a tower in Crackpot Hall, the Fyrdraaca family

home, which, like the Fyrdraacas, has fallen into decay, despite the fact that Buck is the commanding general of the armies of Califa. The fate of the missing Flora is a steady drumbeat throughout this book, and a question, despite a number of tantalizing hints, still unresolved at the end of it.

The reason Crackpot Hall is living up to its name in more ways than one is that the house butler, 'an egregore of the fifth order" called Valefor, was banished by Buck (who, as head of the household, has the power to command him) for reasons that remain murky but may be connected to the disappearance of the first Flora. But because Valefor is a manifestation of the Fyrdraaca family will (Wilce's masterfully developed magical system is powered by Will), he cannot be entirely exorcised without bringing down Crackpot Hall and the family too. Or so Flora discovers one morning when, late for school, she becomes lost amidst the 11,000 rooms of Crackpot Hall and stumbles across, or is led to, Valefor ... what's left of him. Which turns out to be not too much in the substance department but still a very persuasive voice, and this voice has soon convinced Flora to part with an exhalation of breath, a soupçon of essence, which firms Val up quite nicely, for a time ... and at a price Flora will only discover later.

Wilce's writing flirts with excess at times, but it always does so in the service of character, reflecting the volatile nature of her 13-year-old narrator. The novel is published as a YA book, but it is even less of one than, say, *The Golden Compass,* and, like that book, aimed at intelligent, adventurous readers of all ages (indeed, Flora and Lyra are birds of a feather). Yes, the Huitzil are based on the Aztecs; Califa is based on San Francisco and its environs, but this is no alternate history: the novel's potency does not rely on readers teasing out causal connections between its reality and our own. Wilce's world is a delight to explore and discover: it is among the most thoughtfully constructed and artfully elaborated subcreations I have ever encountered.

Weatherwitch, Book Three of the Crowthistle Chronicles, Cecilia Dart-Thornton, Tor, New York, hardcover, 336 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-765-31207-5

Dart-Thornton's prodigious knowledge of folklore and fairy tales, and the droll yet sharp-edged intelligence of her style, reminiscent of Jack Vance in its devastatingly mannered precision, make her one of the most interesting writers working in high fantasy today. It is hard to convey the freshness of Dart-Thornton's approach, other than to say that she rekindles the eldritch quality of familiar tales, weaving them into a larger, highly original tapestry of the fantastic that is Tolkien-like only in that it draws on many of the same sources.

The first two books in The Crowthistle Chronicles, *The Iron Tree* and *The Well of Tears,* established a pattern of two star-crossed lovers finding, and then losing, each other, as a fateful curse slowly worked itself out across generations. Now, in Weatherwitch, the penultimate book in the series, the final product of that curse, 19-year-old Asrathiel Malestronnar, is the daughter of immortal parents who is herself both immortal and all-but-invulnerable. Through her father, she is also a powerful Weathermaster, able to bend the elements to her will.

An enigmatic eldritch wight, a satyrlike Urisk that has been a secondary character in the previous novels, here steps from the shadows into a central role that promises to be the pivot on which the entire series turns. Interestingly, he proves well versed in what we would call advanced science: whether or not this hints at a science-fictional twist to the tale, only the future will tell. Meanwhile, the king of Slievmordhu, Uabhar, has hatched a treacherous plan to conquer all of Tir—a plan that means ruin for the Weathermasters.

Weatherwitch moves at a leisurely pace, plainly setting the stage for the climactic events of the forthcoming *Fallowblade.* The villainous Uabhar is a somewhat stereotypical tyrant, less fully developed than Dart-Thornton's other characters, but, again like Vance, Dart-Thornton is less interested in crafting realistic characters than in recognizable types whose actions possess a certain fated inevitability yet delight and surprise us nonetheless.❧

Paul Witcover

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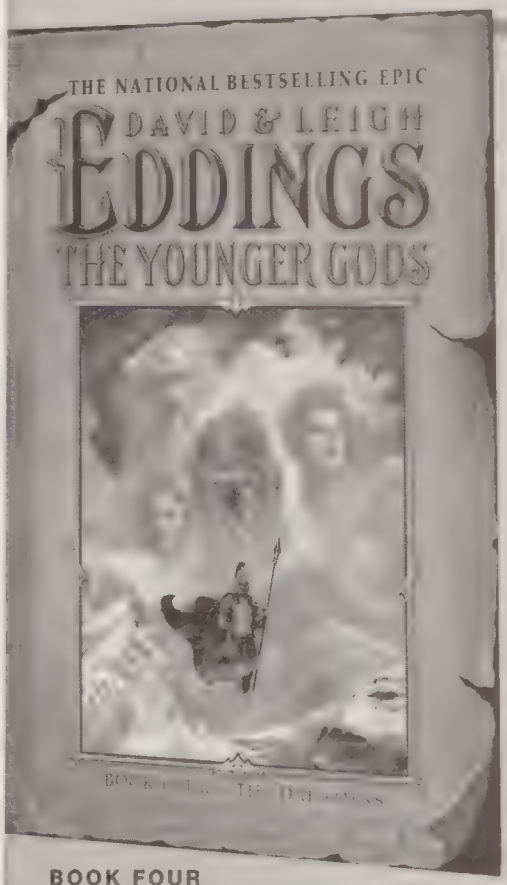

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Afghan Buddha PAYBACK

BY DAVID PINAULT ILLUSTRATION BY LORI KOEFOED

DARLENE SAYS SHE'S TIRED OF LOOKING AT FAKES. Malik Rahman the art dealer makes the mistake of trying to bluff. Absolutely genuine, Miss Corrigan, he says. Absolutely. Priceless Buddhist rarities. He pats his face with a handkerchief. Nervous man. He sweats a lot. ■ Darlene says she didn't fly from L.A. to Pakistan to be offered phony antiques at rip-off prices. She tells the dealer she's got an impulse to knock the whole row of heads to the floor. ■ Which—being Darlene, and impulse control not being her strong point—she proceeds to do. ■ Luckily I've known her long enough to guess what's coming. I catch her sleeve just as she leans in to sweep the counter clean. ■ "Leggo." She shakes her arm free. "No harm trashing junk." ■ I tell her yeah, she's probably right, but still it's not good for foreigners like us to break other people's things when we're guests in their country. Especially for foreigners like me. I've been working here a while and hope to go on doing so.

The Buddha heads smile up at us in a row from the counter.

Mister Rahman is smiling, too, or trying to. He wipes his face again with his hanky and compliments Darlene on her discerning eye.

She tells him cut the crap and show her something worth buying. She's flown umpteen miles to the city of Peshawar and wants to see something good. "I told you," she says. "I have clients to satisfy. Clients willing to pay plenty for authentic Gandharan Buddhist artifacts. So can you supply me or can't you?"

Mister Rahman smiles some more, taps his fingers on the counter, then says it will be difficult but yes he can do it. "Yet for this we will need the services of a finder."

I ask what kind of finder.

"An *'amil ruhani,* Everett Sahib." He pauses, trying to think of the right words to translate the Urdu.

Darlene asks what's an *'amil ruhani.*

I explain. "A spiritual practitioner." I tell her the *'amil ruhani*-types are pretty popular out here. "They practice sorcery, put spells on enemies, that kind of thing."

Malik Rahman says the *'amils* are expensive to hire but useful individuals. "Bad people to cross, of course."

"Sorcery?" Darlene wants to know why the hell we need sorcerers to locate Buddhist artifacts.

Not just any sorcerer, Mister Rahman assures us. "A specialist. A sorcerer who specializes in finding things. Things that people have a big appetite for."

A WORD OF EXPLANATION HERE, ABOUT MY WORK, AND DARLENE'S, AND the deal we're negotiating with Malik Rahman.

When folks ask what I do for a living I generally say I'm a journalist. Which is true, or mostly. I mean I do in fact file freelance stories every so often from whatever country I happen to be in.

But mostly I get by through the odd jobs I do on the side. Courier service. Personal bodyguard. Snooping out information and passing it to interested parties.

And yes: smuggling a few antiquities every now and again.

Of course, to do that right one needs expert help.

Hence Darlene.

Nice credentials, at least at first glance. BA summa cum laude in fine arts from Swarthmore. MA and PhD in art history from Princeton. Followed by seven years teaching at Hamilton College. Tenured, associate professor: the good life.

Then—just like that—it all went smash.

One day some sophomore smart-mouthed her in class. She told him to shut his face or she'd stuff his pimply maw with his own testicles. "Which I promised to serve him"—this at least is how she tells the tale, when she's had a few late-night drinks, which is often—"freshly severed, via rusty scissors." Darlene admits she has a problem with her temper.

Result: Hamilton College cited her for conduct unbecoming and ordered her to attend a sensitivity workshop and write the boy's family an apology.

"I told the family and the college the same thing: Ruck Roo. Go to hell, you and your precious job both." And so forth.

In retrospect, she admits she was bored with the whole academia game.

Three weeks later she made herself a new business card. Darlene Corrigan, PhD. Art acquisition consultant.

Within six months she had as much business as she could handle. Auction houses. Sotheby's. Christie's. All the big museums. Private collectors love her, too. Everyone's hungry to acquire.

Doesn't hurt, of course, that she's good to look at. Petite, skinny, sweet angel-face smile. Blonde hair she wears long and frizzed-out so it flares every which way.

The angel face is offset (and her clients stateside don't know this) by the snub-nosed thirty-eight caliber revolver she carries on her art-acquisition trips overseas. Works wonders, she says, for facilitating cross-cultural exchange and dialogue for a better world.

Our paths first crossed at an Indonesian logging camp in Kalimantan province. She was haggling with aboriginal art dealers from the rain forest. Turns out the two of us shared a sporting interest in Dayak hornbill carvings. Since then I've covered her back—and she's covered mine—at assorted venues. Paraguay. Sierra Leone. Post-Saddam Baghdad.

MALIK RAHMAN HAS LOCKED UP HIS SHOP AND IS WALKING US DOWN the corridor of the Pearl Continental. The Pearl is Peshawar's best hotel—glass and gleaming marble, arcades with kiosks selling pricey tribal jewelry and Kashmiri rugs. Security guards everywhere: the frontier of Afghanistan is only an hour's drive from here. Individuals from all over use the Pearl as a jump-off point for ventures of various kinds. Stand in the lobby and you can amuse yourself picking out the diplomats and aid workers and arms merchants and warlords.

Darlene's reviewing with Mister Rahman what her clients want. "Gandharan sculpture. Second-third century AD. Can you supply us?"

Malik Rahman says Ah yes Gandhara. "The vanished realm of Greco-Buddhist art. The legacy of Alexander the Great's conquest of central Asia and northwest India. The fabled blending of East and West. The Silk Route, and all that." Malik Rahman has a poetic streak—something I like about him, even if he does try to palm off the fake relic here and there.

Darlene says Yes fine but can he supply her and what the hell does he mean when he says he needs the help of sorcerers or spiritual practitioners or whatever he calls them to locate Gandharan artifacts.

The dealer says trust him. "The *'amil* I have in mind will prove useful. Essential, in fact. I don't know his real name. But everyone calls him Baba Jan."

Darlene says Okay okay fine and how about we meet this Baba Jan today here at the Pearl Continental's bar. "Have a drink, talk business. Get this show on the road."

Mister Rahman makes a face and says that would never do. "Our practitioner is too pious to come here and sit in a bar where alcohol is served. No. We will have to go to him."

He says he'll arrange for us to meet the sorcerer this afternoon at Baba Jan's favorite tea house in Peshawar's Old City. "It is rather a traditional neighborhood, I fear. You will need to dress, ah, less conspicuously." He looks Darlene up and down and considers her frizzed-out blonde hair. "More traditionally. Yes. More modestly."

Darlene rolls her eyes. She's not fond of anyone telling her what to do or how to dress. I start to remind her Peshawar's a fundamentalist bastion in the most conservative province of Pakistan.

"No sweat, Billy." She says she wants to nail those artifacts and get her commission the same as I do.

FUNNY. THE LAST TIME I SAW DARLENE BEFORE THIS CURRENT PAKISTAN gig, we were at a reception in New York at the Metropolitan's Greco-Roman gallery. She was flirting with the acquisitions director and gulping vodka martinis. She looked good—Armani silk and black leather micro-skirt and stiletto-heeled boots.

Today, here in Peshawar's Old City quarter, her outfit's a bit different. Flat sensible sandals. A long gray dress with long plain sleeves and a kind of monk's cowl that hides her chest and neck and half her face. Beneath the cowl she's wearing a headscarf that conceals her long blonde hair. All this in deference to local custom.

She says she feels short and stupid. "This wimple-rig makes me look like a goddamned nun."

I correct her. "You look the same as ever. Short and feisty. Like Mighty Mouse."

"Very funny."

I tell her the Mighty Mouse comparison is a compliment. "He was my childhood hero."

She flashes a remind-me-to-shoot-you-later look.

So now we're sitting in a teahouse in the Old City, waiting and waiting for Malik Rahman's sorcerer to show. Just opposite is the Mahabbat Khan mosque. Loudspeakered calls to prayer crackle overhead. The afternoon sun has us sweating. Fumes and street dust make us cough.

We have one cup of tea, then another, then a third. Still no Baba Jan.

Darlene's wondering out loud whether this is a waste of time and saying Hey remember I've got clients to satisfy. I admit I'm getting impatient myself.

A wrinkled little man clutching a burlap sack to his chest shuffles to our table.

Another beggar, I think, and I start to hand him a ten-rupee note. That should be more than enough to make him go away.

Wrong. Malik Rahman hurries around the table and hugs the old man and kisses both his hands and goes all deferential.

"This," he says proudly, "is our spiritual practitioner. Our finder. Our locator. Baba Jan."

Big toothless grin from the old man. Seems a cheerful sort. He bobs his head in Darlene's direction and mumbles something to Malik Rahman.

Darlene asks me what's he saying.

"No idea. They're talking Pashto." My knowledge of Urdu is so-so; my Pashto, close to zilch.

Mister Rahman turns to Darlene like he's announcing she's won a prize. "Baba Jan is praising you for your modesty of dress and respect for our customs."

"Great. Fine. Fine. Tell him thanks, or whatever." She's fidgeting with her wimple and scarf. She looks ready to fling the whole getup into the gutter. Can't blame her. This afternoon heat is fierce.

I don't need to be a mind-reader to guess her thoughts: now that our finder is here, let's get down to business.

Not so fast. Another round of tea is ordered. Baba Jan settles his burlap sack on the table and clasps his hands placidly atop a bulging belly. Massive white whiskers, a face creased and wrinkled with laugh-lines, a gleaming bald head topped by a prayer-cap: a Pakistani Santa Claus. He stirs sugar into his tea and takes long slow sips and smiles at us the whole time.

Darlene fidgets. I admit I'm feeling fidgety myself.

No sooner does Baba Jan finish his first cup than Malik Rahman pours him a second. The dealer says our practitioner is famous from Kabul to Calcutta as a Sufi master and a finder of whatever it is people want most.

Darlene says Well tell him what Billy Everett and I want most right now are some Gandharan Buddhist artifacts, to satisfy our clients stateside. "And what good is a Sufi sorcerer gonna be in locating ancient artifacts? How's he going to help us?"

Baba Jan smiles as if he understood exactly what she said. He reaches for the sack on the table. Something's inside the sack—that much I can see from the way the bag bulges—but what it is I don't know.

Mister Rahman intervenes to say that the bag contains something the Sufi acquired years ago on a trek to Tibet. Baba Jan murmurs in Pashto. "A long trip to the north," explains the dealer. "Up to Baltistan, then across the border to Ladakh. Then on foot to Mount Kailash, where he mingled with the pilgrims to the holy mountain and met Vajra Dorje."

I ask who's Vajra Dorje.

"The Tibetan lama who gave him what's inside the bag."

This is when Baba Jan's hand reaches into the sack. He hesitates a moment and glances at us, as if trying to decide whether to show us the bag's contents. Then, slowly, he withdraws the thing from the bag.

Darlene stops fidgeting. I stop fidgeting too. We hitch our chairs closer to the table for a better look.

Cradled carefully in the old man's hands: a scuffed glass jar, the top fastened tightly with a lid. A dozen elastic rubber bands hold the lid clamped in place. The jar's empty, except for what looks like swirling cigar smoke the color of mud.

I ask What's that.

Malik Rahman clears his throat and hesitates as if unsure how to explain this one. Abruptly Baba Jan turns to us and smiles and speaks in English. "This? Oh, a favorite condiment container. Yes." He shows me a faded label on the exterior. Major Grey's Brand Mango Chutney.

I say, "I mean, what's inside the jar."

He says his djinn.

"Your djinn?"

He says Yes.

I say Djinn as in genie?

Another yes.

I say As in Arabian Nights and three wishes and Aladdin's lamp?

Yes again.

"You're kidding me."

Silence.

Darlene tugs at her wimple and gives me a look that says Let's get out of here we're wasting our time.

I turn back to the Sufi. "Excuse me, but we need a finder to help us locate artifacts. Buddhist artifacts. A simple business proposition. We don't need fairy tale talk about genies."

More silence. Baba Jan's smile ebbs away.

Malik Rahman wipes sweat from his face with a napkin and says Everett Sahib I think you have offended our Baba Jan.

"No," explains the sorcerer. "It is not me he has offended." He touches the jar. "He has offended the djinn. Its name is Siddhartha."

I tell him Okay please tell Siddhartha I'm very sorry.

I figure Hey. No sense offending the locals, even if they live in a Major Grey's mango thingy.

The Sufi gazes expectantly at Darlene. She glares back and says no way is she apologizing to a goddamned chutney jar.

I tell her we're trying to arrange a deal here and could she please get into the spirit of the enterprise.

She says Okay okay she apologizes. She folds her arms and pulls at her headscarf and wimple and says this outfit is strangling her. She adds she's ready to shoot somebody.

But Baba Jan's happy. He smiles and adjusts the rubber bands and rubs the jar. Then he pauses and tilts his head toward the jar and lifts it to his ear. I see the Sufi's lips move.

Darlene interrupts by asking why this djinn is called Siddhartha. "Isn't that a Buddhist name?"

Baba Jan says Yes but this is a Buddhist djinn. "So that should be quite satisfactory then." He adds that Siddhartha the djinn used to inhabit Afghanistan but then wandered to Tibet before getting caught in one of Lama Dorje's djinn-catching spells. "The lama confined it for its own good," he adds. "Something had happened in Afghanistan that made it very angry."

I want to ask just what it takes to anger a djinn but Baba Jan lifts the jar to his ear again.

Siddhartha, he announces, says you foreigners will find what you want in the vicinity of Miran Shah.

An expression of alarm traverses Malik Rahman's face.

Darlene asks what's the problem.

The problem is the town of Miran Shah is in Waziristan, and Waziristan is Taliban country, the most lawless of the Tribal Agencies along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

"The Taliban?" She says she thought Uncle Sam hammered the Tal-

He tells us his djinn Siddhartha says if we have sufficient sense to apologize to Miran Shah, it will show us ancient things splendid enough to impress treasure seekers as sensitive as we foreigners seem to be.

iban but good when we invaded Afghanistan a few years back.

Mister Rahman says yes but unfortunately the Taliban have regrouped across the border in the Tribal Agencies and now have imposed their own version of religious rule in Waziristan. "They are unfriendly to non-Muslims," says the art dealer. "For that matter, they also despise fellow Muslims they deem insufficiently observant of Allah's divine law." He gulps tea and wipes his face.

A cheery smile from our Sufi. He tells us his djinn Siddhartha says if we have sufficient nerve to venture to Miran Shah, it will show us ancient things splendid enough to impress creatures even as avaricious as we foreigners seem to be.

Sufficient nerve? says Darlene. A grin lights up her face. She likes a challenge. "Hey, Waziristan can't be any worse than the time Billy and I heisted a sculpture from the Zeus temple in Baalbek. Remember that, Billy? Our weekend trip to Lebanon. 1997. No. '98."

I tell her I'm not likely to forget. The Temple of Baalbek is next door to the headquarters of that charmingly fanatic militant group known as Hezbollah. They weren't happy to see two Americans treasure hunting in their backyard.

Darlene says remember how I had to save your butt?

I tell her wait up Mighty Mouse as I recall it was her butt that needed saving.

We're still arguing the point as we spread out a map of northwest Pakistan among the tea glasses.

THE FOUR OF US—FIVE IF YOU COUNT THE CHUTNEY JAR—ARE heading west from Peshawar in Malik Rahman's Toyota Land Cruiser. We've got our route nicely plotted. West through the Khyber Pass into Khyber Agency, then south into Kurram Agency and Waziristan.

The Khyber Pass is supposed to be (relatively) safe these days and is the only part of the Tribal Areas open to foreigners. The travel permit we obtained yesterday from the government Political Agent comes with a long list of restrictions. Valid for one day only. Do not attempt to photograph local women lest one provoke an "incident." Remain on the main road—the only part of Khyber Agency patrolled by government forces—and be sure to return to Peshawar by nightfall.

Well, with any luck by nightfall we'll have snuck into Waziristan and have our hands on some Gandharan Buddhist treasures. Provided, of course, our Sufi finder is any good.

As for safety en route: Malik Rahman says he's arranged for an escort of local tribals to meet us at a site called Ali Masjid.

We reach the mouth of the Khyber Pass by 6 AM. First light. Air is good, not yet super-heated by the hot April sun. There've been a few changes since the last time I was here. The road is freshly paved. There are more Pakistani government troops—a regiment of the Khyber Rifles. There's even a Shell station, with gas-pump attendants in blue coveralls and blue baseball caps. We use the restroom—Darlene and I joke about how this is the last friendly toilet paper we'll see for a while.

Otherwise the Pass is the way I remember it. Strings of pack camels and freight trucks belching smoke. Sun-scorched rock and withered shrubs. Cliffs way overhead squeezing the road from either side. Hilltop forts, windowless like prisons. And—perched on a slope just above the road—the crumbling mud-brick remains of a three-tiered spire of enlightenment.

"A Buddhist stupa," says Darlene.

Or what's left of it: someone's machine-gunned it for fun. Its murals are gouged and defaced with bayonet stabs.

Baba Jan the sorcerer has been sitting quietly in back holding the chutney jar in his lap. Now he speaks up. He says Siddhartha remembers this locale as the site of a great wounding.

I ask him to explain. All he says is, "Before Muslim Pakistan, the British. Before the British, the age of the Moghul emperors. Before the Moghuls, the pilgrims who paused here in their journeys to offer their reverence. The earth has not forgotten."

He leans forward to murmur something to his jar and then straightens in his seat. Five minutes later he tells us to stop.

Ali Masjid. The heart of the Khyber Pass. A kind of junction: a dirt track from the hills meets the roadway here. Two buildings: a mosque and a tea stall.

Baba Jan and Malik Rahman enter the mosque for prayers. Darlene and I wait outside. A truck goes by. Then silence, and the rising morning heat. Flies seek our faces for the sweat.

Malik Rahman exits first. I ask the dealer to level with us. "Is this Baba Jan guy nuts or what?" I ask if this Sufi's going to be worth what we're paying. "I mean come on—he goes around carrying what he says is a djinn in a jar."

"God is great, Everett Sahib." Malik Rahman says he himself is a pious man but when it comes to demons and such-like he's a modern individual and strictly a skeptic. "As for our Baba Jan. He talks to his glass vessel that is supposed to contain something wondrous and he prays a lot. That is all. And yet somehow"—here the dealer shrugs—"from time to time he has located valuable things for me to sell. Not once, but several times."

I ask how does Baba Jan manage to do this.

"God is great, Everett Sahib." Another shrug. "If I knew I would tell you."

A smiling Baba Jan emerges just as two Datsun pickups lurch from the dirt track onto the road. The back of each pickup is crammed with bearded men. Men, and rifles, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

Malik Rahman the dealer announces our escort is here.

I tell him they look like a bunch of Taliban thugs.

He says Everett Sahib they are in fact Talibs.

He sees the look on my face and shrugs once more. The shrug says it all: what safer way to transit Talib country than to hire Talibs as escorts?

The jar's rolled onto its side atop the table. The smoke or whatever is in there swirls and roils. For a second the lid bulges outward as if pressed from within.

NEGOTIATIONS.

Three Talib honchos sit around a table with us in front of the Ali Masjid tea stall. The rest of their crew squat in the shade of the mosque.

Malik Rahman does the introductions.

First, Abdul Something Something. I'm bad with names, and with this heat glaring off the hills it's hard to think. Abdul's an old guy, tall and bony, with straggly gray hair and tired gray eyes. Looks used up. He's supposed to be the boss.

Supposed to be, but within two minutes it's clear who everyone's afraid of: a squat thick-chested individual they call Fazil the Chechen. He has bandoliers looped over both shoulders. Cradled in his arms is an RPG launcher. He says he's an "adviser."

The third Talib at the table is a young guy who fills the time before tea is served by pushing a comb through his hair and beard. He's fussy how he looks: he keeps checking his coiffure in a hand mirror he carries. His hairdo reminds me of someone from the movies. Can't place it.

"Leonardo DiCaprio," whispers Darlene beside me. "*Titanic*."

She's not saying much right now. Abdul the squad chief offered to let her sit with us but Fazil the Chechen spat on the ground and said he wasn't about to let a half-naked woman have a place at the table. For a minute I thought the ex-art history professor was going to throw something at him. She may have a Princeton PhD but she's also a scrappy kid who grew up in public housing in Camden, New Jersey.

Malik Rahman smoothed things over by pulling a burqa from our Toyota and asking her please to wear it for modesty's sake.

"Modesty, hell." She reminded us she was already wearing a headscarf and wimple. I reminded her we were here to score loot and told her not to lose sight of the goal.

So now she's beside me at the table, hidden from view under the tent-style burqa. She says she can't see shit. I tell her we stand to make a nice profit off this deal if we can just keep things together.

Abdul and Malik Rahman are arguing over the escort fee. Meanwhile Baba Jan the sorcerer is wrapping additional rubber bands around his chutney jar. He's been adding them all morning. There must be dozens now, as if he's getting worried about the lid coming off. Strange, considering there's nothing inside but that funny mud-colored smoke.

Fazil the Chechen watches the old man. Abruptly he motions for Baba Jan to give him the jar.

The Sufi doesn't want to. He backs away from the table, both hands over the jar. He says something in Pashto. I catch the word Siddhartha.

The Chechen frowns and levels the RPG and points it at the sorcerer's chest. DiCaprio the hair-comb boy comes around the table and snatches the jar and delivers it to Fazil.

The Chechen grunts and cradles the launcher and idly begins removing the rubber bands from around the jar. Baba Jan opens his mouth as if to say something but in the end says nothing. I get the notion he wants to warn the Chechen of something. A server from the stall brings tea.

Fazil removes one rubber band, then another. He's smiling. He's in control. He's the boss.

Then he yelps and drops the jar and waves his hands as if they've just been scorched. He bellows something angrily in Pashto. I catch two words: *atesh* and *aor*. Flame and fire.

The jar's rolled onto its side atop the table. The smoke or whatever is in there swirls and roils. For a second the lid bulges outward as if pressed from within. Then a spark or flash of some kind flares within the jar.

I ask Darlene if she just saw what I just saw.

She says she's sure she just saw a pair of eyes in the smoke.

I'm not so sure myself but I don't have time to think about it. Fazil has just turned and said something to DiCaprio. Comb-boy jumps to his feet as if eager to please and grabs the jar.

He raises his arm and looks ready to smash the thing to the ground. Baba Jan darts me a look that says Help.

Darlene and I leap from our seats and tackle the Talib at the same time. All three of us hit the ground. From inside her burqa Darlene thrusts forth a hand and wrenches the jar from DiCaprio and passes it to me. I pass it in turn to a grateful Baba Jan.

I twist about and find Fazil's RPG pointed straight at my face.

"You fire that, shithead"—this from Darlene to Fazil—"and you can kiss your escort fee goodbye."

The Chechen surprises us with a response in English. He says he always collects his fees, but he knows how to be patient. He lowers the launcher.

Across the table Baba Jan is busy wrapping more rubber bands around the jar. He says Siddhartha is a Buddhist djinn, and it only scorches those who have harmed the Buddhist Way.

DiCaprio comes out with a little speech. He says proudly our adviser here is someone who has in fact inflicted harm on the unbelievers and their pagan ways. "Our Fazil is a big man. An explosives expert. Sheikh Osama brought him all the way from Grozny to supervise the destruction of the infidel statues."

The big statues, says DiCaprio—as if in awe of the Chechen's achievement—hundreds of feet tall, in the north of Afghanistan. "No one else had the skill to plant the charges properly and blow them up."

I hear Darlene hiss inside her burqa. "So this is the creep who destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan."

Baba Jan is rubbing the jar as if to soothe whatever is inside. The smoke in there looks thicker, stormier. It roils and writhes. The light flickers again, like something coiled in darkness, waiting to let fly.

"STOP HERE," SAYS THE SORCERER.

We've been driving for hours, south from the Pass into Kurram Agency and then into Waziristan. Nightfall, and the lights of some town ahead. Baba Jan points. "Miran Shah." He says Siddhartha the djinn says turn west now and leave the road.

The two Datsun pickups follow us as we jounce in the dark over a track even more rock-studded than the one we left.

Darlene asks why the old man keeps wrapping more rubber bands around the chutney jar. "Is he afraid whatever's inside is gonna get out?" She tries to make what she says a joke, but she sounds nervous. I know I'm nervous. We've both been watching the jar. The smoke inside is writhing more, and that funny light keeps flickering.

The Sufi sees us staring. I swear he looks a bit uneasy himself. He holds up the container. Siddhartha, he explains, is an angry being.

Darlene says she'd be irritable too, cooped up like that. She's still wearing the wimple get-up and not liking it much.

Angry beings, says Baba Jan, are dangerous to travel with. "But Vajra Dorje the lama made me promise to keep Siddhartha confined until I found it a suitable home."

He wraps what must be the hundredth rubber band around the glass and then holds up his hand and says *Accha accha. Yaheen thairie.* We jerk to a halt.

So this is the place.

Doesn't look like much. Our Toyota's headlamps pick out swirls of dust in the night. Also a few leafless trees. And piled-up rocks. Lots of rocks.

Otherwise nothing. Nothing Darlene and I can resell in London or New York.

"A long drive for nothing," I say.

And then we both see it.

A statue of the Buddha, perched on a ledge. Carved in marble, flawless, perfect. The half-closed eyes, the calm smile, the right hand raised in a gesture of reassurance: all convey a message—serenity, compassion, detachment from any thought of worldly gain.

Darlene turns to me and says just what I'm thinking. "We're looking at an easy five hundred thou in commissions from Sotheby's."

"Maybe six hundred," I say for the sake of argument. "Six fifty."

"More. It's unbroken. Intact."

Not for long. Comb-boy DiCaprio jumps up on the ledge and starts playing around. First he lights a cigarette and places it between the Buddha's lips. He takes out his comb and pretends to brush the statue's topknot. He clowns and grins and yells to his pals.

Fazil the Chechen shouts up at him. I catch the words *kuffar* and *boot-parastee:* Infidels and idolatry.

DiCaprio stops clowning and gets all pious now. He grinds the lit cigarette against the marble face and spits on the Buddha.

And that's when I hear the first rubber band pop.

Just one. But then another, and a third. Baba Jan's careful wrapping job is coming undone. Something swirls inside the chutney jar. The sorcerer looks alarmed.

Talib Comb-boy spits again. Baba Jan wraps his hands tightly around the glass. Desperate to keep the lid on.

More rubber bands pop.

Fazil the Chechen reaches up to DiCaprio and hands him something. The other Talib goons cheer.

I see what it is. A hammer.

Comb-boy hefts the tool and steps before the serenely smiling Buddha face.

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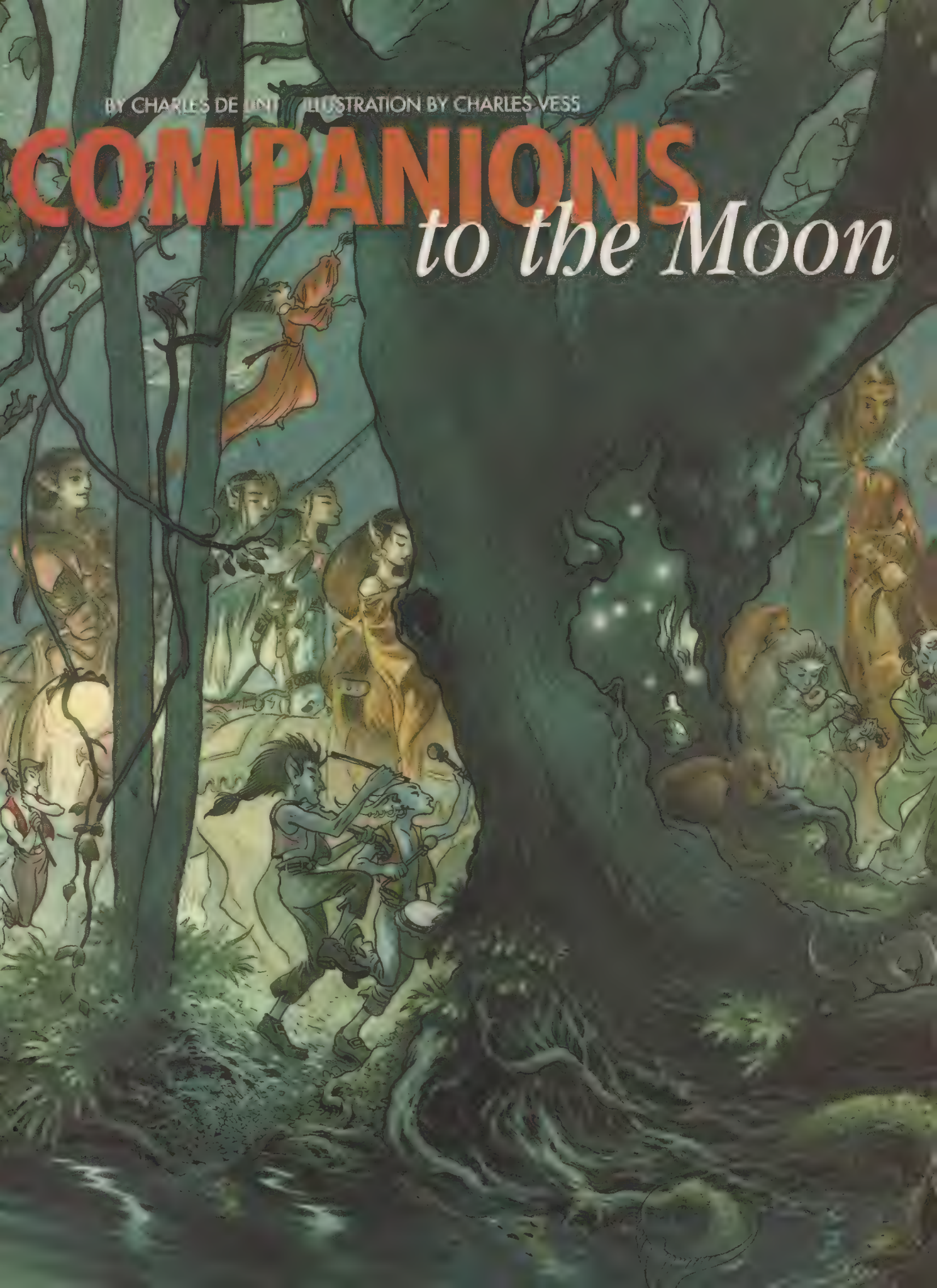

BY CHARLES DE LINT
ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLES VESS
COMPANIONS
to the Moon

Here's a special treat for readers: Fantasy artist extraordinaire Charles Vess has allowed us to pair six of his paintings with six of our favorite fantasy authors, and we're delighted to present "Companions to the Moon" by Charles de Lint, the first offspring of this exciting collaborative marriage.

"I think Edric's cheating on me."

Gwen's eyes widen, then fill with sympathy.

We're sitting across from each other at a small table in the Half Kaffe Café. It's a regular haunt of ours—as Bohemian as Gwen can tolerate, and about as uptown as I'll go. They make an excellent cup of regular coffee, but they also serve the fancy chi-chi drinks that she likes. Decaf soy lattes. Chai teas.

"Oh, Mary," she says. "That's awful."

I've known Gwen forever. We were best friends from kindergarten all the way through to our final year of high school when I made a sharp turn into garage rock-slash-punkdom, while Gwen suddenly became this responsible young woman aiming for university whom I couldn't recognize anymore. It felt like it happened overnight. One moment we were doing everything together—Girl Guides, piano lessons, messing about in the woods behind her house—the next we were strangers.

But while we drifted apart—I couldn't care less about a house in the suburbs, or worry about finding a good job, and the last thing Gwen would do is listen to the Clash or come to a Stooges concert with me—we made an effort to stay friends. Once or twice a month we had lunch, or the occasional dinner, and caught up. Sometimes we even brought our husbands.

Okay, Edric and I aren't married. But seven years together is almost as good as, don't you think?

"How did you find out?" she asks.

"Well, I haven't, exactly. It's just this feeling I get."

Gwen nods wisely. She starts to tick off points on her fingers. "Doesn't seem as interested in you anymore. Hang-ups when you pick up the phone. Has to work late a lot more often than he used to."

"None of the above. You forget, he's always out late."

"Duh," she says and slaps her brow with the palm of her hand. "Working musician."

"Anyway, I can't quite put my finger on it. We just don't seem to do as much together. I mean, we used to do the shopping as a couple. Yard work, household chores. Now, he's says that if I'm getting groceries, it's more efficient if he puts in a load of laundry, or does some weeding in the garden. I liked that we did that kind of thing together, but now we hardly do."

"So tell him."

"I have. It doesn't help."

"And is he taking more out-of-town gigs than he used to?"

I shake my head. "No, but that's a funny thing. I was looking at the calendar the other day and noticed that most of his out-of-town gigs are during a full moon. Then I checked the Web site his booking agent put up for him, and he's always out of town during the full moon."

Gwen smiles. "Maybe he's a werewolf."

"That's not helping."

"I'm sorry," she says. "But there's always been something different about him."

Different? I suppose. There's certainly always been a part of him that I can't reach—that I feel I'll never know—but that touch of mysteriousness is half of what attracted me to him in the first place. And I've never been the kind of person who believes in changing the person I'm with. You fall in love with them because of who they are. Unless they acquire some new, destructive habit, why would you want to change them?

"Just remember," Gwen says. "You're not defined by your relationship to him."

"I know that."

"And besides, you're not even married."

That's so Gwen. For her, a piece of paper always has more weight than the knowledge we acquire beyond school or university, or the depth of the feelings people carry around in their hearts.

For me, the feeling is everything.

We fall silent for a few moments. I drink some of my coffee and consider getting one of the café's fancy scones. Gwen has a sip of latte and I know she's not even tempted by the treats behind glass at the counter. She's looking out the window. It's a beautiful autumn day out there, but that's not what has her attention.

I'm not sure if she's fascinated or repulsed by the parade of people with their tats and piercings and individual fashion sense. Probably a little of both. She so doesn't fit into the scene down here in Crowsea, but I feel right at home.

"You know," she says, "whenever I hear about something like this, a big change that comes out of nowhere ..."

She gets this look that I'm beginning to recognize. This has come up before. Her gaze turns to meet mine.

"What happened that last year of high school?" she asks. "I thought we'd be friends forever."

"We're still friends," I say, my voice mild.

She nods. "But you know what I mean. You just changed overnight."

"I didn't change. I evolved. If anyone changed, it was you."

"I didn't ..."

"Besides," I say before she can go on. "Change doesn't automatically mean bad. Sometimes we need to change, to become who we really are."

"And who are you, really, Mary?"

This is new. I'm about to brush off her question with a joke, but I think about what's happened to me, my suspicions about Edric, and the way it has me feeling stupid, spying on him, grasping for some, any kind of understanding.

"I don't know," I tell her.

I manage a CD shop over on Williamson, but I don't believe that people are defined by their jobs any more than they are by their relationships. Both can tell you something about a person, but they're only pieces of the big puzzle. And that's what I am to myself right now. A big puzzle.

"It's like you're a Neanderthal if you don't have a half-dozen tattoos and something stuck in your tongue, or dangling from a place that was never meant to dangle anything."

"This is going to sound awful," she says, "and I'm totally sympathetic to your situation, but I have to admit that there's a little piece of me that feels relieved that you can be going through all of this."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's just ... well, I found out that Bill's been going to this Web site called Suicide Girls. You know, it's one of those pay porn sites where girls pose naked. Girls who, you know ..."

"Are all tattooed and pierced like me."

She nods. "Everywhere you turn, that's the cool thing. Actors, musicians, porn stars, for God's sake. They're all cool. It's like you're a

Neanderthal if you don't have a half-dozen tattoos and something stuck in your tongue, or dangling from a place that was never meant to dangle anything."

"In your opinion."

"In my opinion, yes. All of you are the people who are sexy and cool while the rest of us are just, I don't know, drones or something."

"I don't think you're a drone," I tell her. "And I don't think that there's anything innately cool about tats or piercings. They're either something you use to express yourself, or they're not."

"That's not what the media seems to be telling us these days."

I smile. "Except mostly what I see in the media are skinny women with big boobs and blonde hair. They're not exactly Goths, or punks."

"No, but they make it out like there's this whole exotic underground that ordinary people can't be a part of."

"Do you want to be a part of it?"

"That's not the point. They're selling it as the new cool. I mean, Angelina Jolie's already way more beautiful than any of us could ever hope to be. Do they really need to add in tattoos when they hype her?"

"So don't listen to them."

We fall silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I shouldn't have said anything like that."

I can't help but smile. I know I should be a little pissed off, but this is Gwen. She's so square that they check rulers against her to make sure they're straight.

"But you can't help but feel relieved to find out that 'cool' people—" I mark quotations in the air between us. "—have their problems, too."

"I know. I'm an awful friend, aren't I?"

I shake my head. "No, you're just being honest. We've earned the right to that between us." I wait a beat, then add, "So you think Bill's cheating on you, too. Maybe with some little tattooed Goth girl?"

"Oh, God, no. I just find it weird that that kind of thing could turn him on."

"Did you ask him about it?"

She shook her head. "In a vague sort of way. But he thought I was accusing him of lusting after you."

"And you didn't correct him?"

"No. Because then he'd know I was poking through his browser history. Oh, come on," she adds at the look on my face. "Everybody does that. Don't tell me you never have."

"I never have," I say. "And even if Edric wasn't a complete Luddite and actually used our computer, I still wouldn't."

"He doesn't use a computer?"

"He doesn't like any kind of modern technology. I got him a cell phone, but while he carries it around, he doesn't even have it turned on. When I asked him why he kept it, he said he thought of it as a talisman to remind him of me."

"That's ... different."

"No, that's just Edric."

"So what are you going to do about him?"

I shrug. "What else can I do? The next full moon, I should follow him to whatever gig he's supposed to have."

"Or you could just ask him," Gwen says.

"Right."

"You seem to think I should have done that with Bill."

"This is different."

"How's it different?"

I nod slowly. "I guess it's not really, is it? It's just women being insecure and doesn't it suck that with all these strides we're supposed to have made, we still come around to this: letting our confidence be undermined by our relationships. God, it's like high school all over again."

"Except you've already got the tattoos and piercings this time," she says.

"Ha ha."

But she's right.

"HAVE YOU BEEN CHEATING ON ME?" I ASK EDRIC.

Here's the thing when people have something to hide. Usually, they don't answer you right away. Instead, they come back with a question, like "Why would you think that?" Or maybe they just say, "I can't believe you think that." They beat around the bush until you make them answer you, yes or no, simple as that.

Edric looks at me with what appears to be genuine surprise.

"No," he says.

We've just finished dinner. He doesn't have a gig tonight. We have the whole evening, so what better way to spend this time together than accusing my partner of being unfaithful?

"It's just ... things feel different between us," I say when he doesn't fill the silence.

BUT THAT AWKWARD BIT OF CONVERSATION NEVER HAPPENS.

I agree with Gwen. It's what I should do, but while Edric and I do have the evening free, he spends it practicing his guitar, and I stay busy scanning pictures of musicians from British music magazines, and then making buttons out of the printouts that I can sell in the store.

It's Tuesday night. This Wednesday's a full moon. And of course Edric's got an out-of-town gig. So I'm going to do the stupid, senseless thing. I'm going to follow him to the gig and see what, if anything, is going on. I've already got one of my part-timers coming in so that I can have the two days off.

I know, I know. He could be doing the dirty deed while I'm at the store during the day, but I don't think so. I'd know if he was having somebody in the apartment besides his music buddies, and there are none of the usual signs when he comes back from being out. It's only these nights of the full moon. Now that I'm paying attention, I can sense some tension in him as the time approaches, and he's ... I don't know. Relieved when he comes back.

You could put it down to gig nerves, but the one place he's entirely at home is on stage with his guitar in his hand.

WEDNESDAY MORNING I LEAVE THE APARTMENT THE SAME TIME I ALWAYS do, but instead of walking to the store, I take El Sub to my friend Karen's place in Upper Foxville. She's lending me her car. And a blonde wig to hide my black hair.

"You're sure you don't want me to come with?" she asks. "Because these things never turn out well."

"No, I'm good. And really, how bad can it be?"

"If you find out he is cheating on you? Really bad." She pauses to give me a considering look. "Unless you don't care anymore."

"Oh, I care."

"Then maybe you should have some company."

"No," I repeat. "This is going to turn out to be all in my own head."

Karen sighs, but she lets it go.

Thirty minutes later I'm parking behind the store. I'm working the morning since I know Edric won't be leaving until around three or so. His gig's in Sweetwater tonight, which isn't that far out of town. He'll want to miss the rush hour traffic, but it's not like he has a whole day of driving ahead of him.

"I sure hope your uncle's going to be okay," Cassidy says when I come in the back door.

See, that's what this has done to me. Not only am I going all weird about Edric, I'm lying to people about it. Cassidy thinks I'm going to take care of a sick uncle for a couple of days.

I nod. "It's only until my cousin gets back. I'm just going to make sure everything's okay at the house—get him some groceries, that kind of thing."

I leave the lie hanging between us in the back room and go out into the front to make sure everything's okay. I check that there's plenty of stock on this week's sale items, ask Laura if we need change and if she'll put up the buttons I made last night, then I go into my office to get yesterday's deposit ready for the bank.

The day drags the way it only can when you're waiting on something, but finally it's time for me to get going. I don't put on the wig

until I'm in the car, adjusting it in the rearview mirror, then I ease out into the traffic and head for home.

Or rather, a half-block away from home where I can see our car parked in front of the apartment building. My timing's pretty good, because by the time I get parked myself, I see Edric coming out of the building. He loads his guitar and gear, then pulls out.

And right away my fears seem to be confirmed. Instead of taking any of the eastbound streets, which is what he'll need to do to get to Sweetwater, he works his way over to Williamson Street and then heads north. I stay a few cars back as I follow him out of town and onto the highway.

This so sucks.

I want to turn around and return Karen's car to her, go back to the store and just forget about all of this. But it's way too late for that. Now I have to know where he's going, what he's up to. Who he's doing it with.

It's so pathetic. I should have just confronted him last night instead of going through all of this crap. Right now I should just pull him over to the side of the road and demand he level with me. But no, I feel trapped in this stupid plan I've put into motion and all I do is follow him.

We go up as far as an old deserted motel that sits on the inside of a curve of the highway. He signals and turns into its parking lot, steering around the clumps of weeds and broken asphalt. I drive by, stopping on the side of the road when the curve takes me out of sight. I yank off the wig, jump out of my own vehicle and run back through the woods and brush. By the time I can see the motel, the car's no longer there.

Hidden around back, I'm guessing.

This is gross. Couldn't he and his girlfriend at least get a room in a working motel?

I cut across the parking lot, then follow the wall of the building to the rear. There I see the car, its engine still pinging. I lift my gaze and spot Edric heading into the woods on the far side of a wide field behind the motel.

Now I don't know what to think. He can't have some girl stashed away in the forest, can he? So what's he doing? What could possibly bring him out here every full moon?

Gwen's stupid comment about werewolves comes to mind, but I dismiss it before it can even start to take hold. This isn't a story about boogiemen. Whatever sordid secret Edric's got hidden in these woods, it relates to this world, not the make-believe world of horror movies or fairy tales.

When Edric disappears in between the trees, I jog across the field, aiming for the big oak tree that marks the place where he vanished from my view. I slow down when I get near, trying to walk carefully, but I'm a city girl, not some Indian tracker. I know I'm making noise. I just hope it's not enough to give me away.

It's cooler under the trees, but surprisingly clear of brush. I button up my coat and step under the oak's boughs. They're heavy with dead leaves, brown and golden. Beyond the oak, it's all tall pine trees and next to no underbrush. The forest floor is littered with their needles. I can see a fair distance through the trees, but it still takes me a few moments to find Edric. When I do, I duck behind the fat trunk of a big pine tree and mouth a silent curse when I lean against it and my hand comes away sticky with sap.

I peer around the trunk to see that Edric's stopped. He's about a hundred yards away, reaching into what I assume is a hollow of a tree trunk until I realize his hands are going right into the wood. That barely has time to register before he starts pulling something ... no. Someone out of the trunk.

And then I realize that it's not just someone. It's himself. He's pulling a mirror image of himself out of the tree.

I try to make sense out of what I'm seeing, but it's no use. It can't make sense because it's impossible.

I can feel myself starting to shut down.

This isn't real. This can't be real.

I sink to my haunches and lean against the pine, not caring if I get sap on my clothes or hair. With bark rough against my face, I watch as Edric talks to his double.

There has to be a rational explanation for this, I think, as Edric's double takes the car keys from Edric's hand, then turns away to retrace Edric's path through the trees. I move around the tree so that I won't be in his line of sight as he comes by.

Okay. Figure this out.

Edric has a twin he hasn't told me about. That's possible—and the only probable explanation. And since people can't exist inside trees, Edric's twin must have been standing on the other side of the tree and it just looked as if he'd stepped out of it.

Children, I tell myself. They're just children. Except some of them have wings and they're no bigger than cats. They're flying—flying!—above the riders, carrying their lanterns and ...

It doesn't explain why they're meeting here in the woods, but at least I no longer have to feel like I've gone off the deep end.

I peek around my tree and see that Edric's walking off, deeper into the woods. I look around the other side. His twin goes by, heading for the field. The resemblance is eerie. They're even wearing the exact same clothes. I start when a twig snaps under his feet.

I wait and watch until he steps into the field, then I force myself to my feet. I still feel a little shaky, but I can deal with all of this now. I give the twin a last glance, just to make sure he's really leaving, then set off in the direction Edric took.

When I think about what I've seen, I realize that the twins are switching places and I wonder what that means for this relationship I've had with Edric for the past seven years. Was it with him, with his twin brother, or some weird combination of the two?

It's not him cheating on me with another woman—at least not so far as I've seen yet—but the more I think about it, the angrier I get.

I should just leave. I should go home and pack up his crap and leave it waiting for him or his twin out on the curb. Because there's something particularly twisted about how all of this is playing out.

I slow down when I see that Edric has stopped up ahead. He's standing in a small clearing. To get to that clearing myself, I have to leave the quiet carpet of pine needles for the underbrush that's growing up on the edges of the meadow. I look left and right, then spy a ridge of granite that rises steadily on the north side. It could give me a view of the meadow. It just depends on how much foliage there is in the way.

It's starting to get dark now, so I hurry over to the ridge and clamber up the rock. It's steeper than I thought, but I find plenty of hand-

and toe-holds and soon I'm jogging along the top of the ridge, my running shoes quiet on the granite.

I keep an eye on the meadow as I go. Edric's still just standing there. Waiting for something, I guess. Probably for some bush girl who lives out here where sensible people don't even visit, never mind live.

Finally, I reach the part of the ridge that's closest to the meadow. There are pine boughs in the way, but I find places where I can peer through them and get a good line of view. Behind Edric is another of the massive oaks that seem to be scattered through this mostly evergreen wood. I'm close enough that I could call out to him and he'd hear me.

The dusk is steadily falling. I can still make Edric out. He's wearing a pale tan fleece and the light from the moon picks it out. Around me, the forest falls deeper and deeper into shadows.

I'm not sure when I start to hear the music—fiddles and drums and bells playing a soft marching rhythm. I just know I've been hearing it for a few moments before I see lights approaching on the far side of the meadow. And then ...

I have to shake my head.

It figures. Who else would Edric be meeting out here but some back-to-the-earth Renaissance Fayre types. These are riding horses and they're all decked out in fancy gowns and robes. Edric's played the Fayres for years—he took me there on one of our first dates and didn't I fit in, all in black with my tats and my hair cut short and spiked. I'd laughed when Edric put on the hose, doublet, and all to play the wandering minstrel, but had to admit he had the build that could pull it off.

They all took it so seriously. Apparently, a lot of them were part of something called the Society for Creative Anachronism and they had this whole role-playing thing set up where they dressed like medieval lords and ladies and had feasts and jousts and, of course, the Fayres.

I ended up liking a lot of them—once we got over our mutual culture shock. But today? Not so much. Between finding out Edric's got a twin who's apparently been sharing his conjugal rights, traipsing around in the autumn woods, which is not my idea of fun, and now this, I'm not feeling particularly charitable toward them.

I figure the looker on the front horse is the woman he's here to see. She's wearing the usual SCA low-cut bodice, a blue green cape flowing over her mount's withers. She has a crown—naturally—and her hair is a dark waterfall that goes all the way to the small of her back in a curtain of ringlets. The rest of them are acting like they are her court—like she's the queen her crown says she is. I start to look for a safe way down to confront them when it occurs to me that none of the riders are carrying the lights. The lanterns are bobbing in the air, floating above the little entourage. And then I see ... then I see ...

Children, I tell myself. They're just children.

Except some of them have wings and they're no bigger than cats. They're flying—flying!—above the riders, carrying their lanterns and ... and ...

My knees feel weak. I sit down on the stone under my feet before my legs give way.

I try to convince myself that I'm not seeing what my eyes are telling me I am. They're doing it all with wires. Mirrors. It's just a trick. That's all.

Just.

A.

Trick.

The music falls silent when the lead rider stops her horse directly in front of Edric. She says something to him. I can hear her voice—high and musical—but I can't make out what she's saying. It's in some language I've never heard before.

Then they both look in my direction.

Oh crap.

They don't know I'm here. They can't know I'm here.

But then a pair of those flying cat-sized people comes zipping from the meadow and my pulse goes into overdrive. I want to bolt, but I can't even get to my feet. The pair dart between the boughs of the spruce, holding their lanterns, until they're circling above me. I'm blinded by the light and hold my arm up to cover my eyes. They make a last circle above me—so close the hummingbird motion of their wings has my hair lifting and fluttering and I can smell the sweet oil from their lanterns—then they're gone again. I see stars until my eyes adjust to the darkness.

My heart is still drumming in my chest when I hear the woman speak once more—this time in English.

"You know what happens now," she says.

I see Edric nod. His shoulders are drooped.

He knows, and I can guess. They're going to do something to me—I don't know what. Wipe my mind of the memory of seeing them, maybe. Banish me into some weird Fairyland prison.

Or they could just kill me.

I sit straighter and stare at them, waiting for I don't know what. My sentence to be pronounced, I suppose. But I won't go without a fight.

I look around and reach for a branch that's lying on the stone nearby. I make myself get up—will the shaking in my legs to stop. When I'm sure I have my balance, I break the branch against my knee. That gives me two small clubs with which to defend myself.

The snap is loud in the night. Edric and the fairy court turn in my direction. I can see the queen frowning from where I stand, but then she lifts her arm. I stiffen and try to psych myself for the attack I'm sure she's about to command. But when she brings her hand down, the whole fairy court simply vanishes and the woods are plunged into night.

It takes my eyes a long moment to adjust to the darkness again. When they do, I can't see Edric anymore. I have the sudden thought that I've just dreamed the whole thing. Any moment I'll wake up—back home, in my own bed—and everything will be back to normal. But then I hear a scuffling on the rock below. I step closer to the edge and see Edric working his way up a switchback to the top of the ridge.

There are only three turns—the ridge is no more than twenty-or-so feet high. I step back from the edge when he comes into view, my clubs held out in front of me. The light's poor, even with the bright moonshine coming down through the trees, but I know he sees me. Sees what I'm holding.

"Mary," he says.

I glare at him.

"So, what did she tell you to do?" I demand. "Are you supposed to try to kill me?"

He shakes his head. I can't read his features.

"Nothing like that," he says.

"Yeah, right."

Neither of us says anything for a long moment.

"Why couldn't you just leave well enough alone?" he finally asks.

"Why did you have to have secrets?"

"I was under a geas," he says. "Do you know what that means?"

I nod. "Some kind of old promise or something."

"I wasn't allowed to tell you. I wasn't allowed to tell anyone. It was like ... like a fairy tale, you know? Like Bluebeard's room."

"Oh, that's a great example," I say, "considering he turned out to be some kind of serial killer freak. And if we're going to use folklore as an ethical barometer, what about all those sailor boys who are gone seven years, but then come back and try to trick their loyal girlfriends with some sleazy pick-up shtick?"

"Okay, you're right. What I mean is—"

"Who are you?"

"We're of the sidhe."

"She who? What's that supposed to mean? Are you talking about that woman on the horse?"

He shakes his head. "Sidhe," he repeats and spells it out for me. "They're one of the elfin races."

"Elfin."

"As in pixies, fairies ..."

"And you're one of them?"

He nods.

"I guess this is a whole new twist on having your boyfriend come out of the closet to tell you he's a fairy." I think about it for a moment, then add, "Is this why you never wanted to have kids?"

He nods again.

"Could we even have had kids?"

"Yes, but our children would be half-breeds."

"Jesus, would you listen to yourself."

He winces. "I'm sorry. I'm not saying I agree. But that's what my people would call him. The Court—for the most part—is against mixed marriages, and especially the children that result."

"Why would they even have to know?" I say. "And we wouldn't have had to tell anyone—not even our little girl. No one would have to know except for us."

"Because our child ... she would be different. She would be able to do things that we would have to teach her to control."

I'd noticed that we both had our own ideas about the gender of this child we'll never have. Apparently Edric did, too. But his attempt to soothe me by coming over to my side just pisses me off. Everything about this pisses me off. I know I should be trying to see some way past this, some way we can work things out. We've been together for so long. We were happy for so long. But there's this huge lie rearing up between us now. And that twin of his, taking his place who knows how many times when I thought it was him?

I can't stop the fury, burning up all the love and good memories. Knowing what I now know, I'm not sure I even want to.

"And I suppose this fairy queen's your little bit on the side?" I ask.

"God, no. She's my sister."

"Your sister. And I guess that was your brother you pulled out of the tree earlier?"

He shakes his head. "That was a kind of changeling—made to take my place in the world while I conducted my business here."

"And did that business include him banging me when you were too busy to do it yourself?"

"No, no."

"So what kind of business?"

"Court business. I'm a prince of the Court. No matter how much I'm not interested in it, I have responsibilities I can't shirk. So we made an agreement—my parents and I. I could live in the world of men so long as I came back once a lunar cycle to fulfill my obligations to the Court." He pauses for a moment, then adds, "And so long as no one discovered the truth."

"Do you know how stupid that sounds?"

"Why? Because it doesn't fit in with your concept of living life as a free spirit, the establishment be damned?"

I don't have an answer for that.

"I have to go now," he says.

"Of course you do."

"I didn't want it to work out this way."

"Of course you didn't—but here we are, all the same."

"I ..." He stops. When he goes on, I know this isn't what he started to say. "The changeling ... he gets to have my life now. I'm not going to tell you what to do or not to do, but I don't recommend you see him. He's not human and he can be dangerous."

"Except, apparently, you're not human either."

"No, but—"

"Oh, don't worry. I don't want anything more to do with either you or your doppelganger."

"Changeling."

"Whatever."

He sighs. "Why did you have to follow me?" he asks.

I have to laugh. "I thought you were having an affair."

"If you'd trusted me—"

"What? We could have happily lived a lie for a while longer?"

"It wasn't like that for me."

I shake my head. "You knew everything about me, but it turns out I didn't know the first thing about you. Was everything you told me a lie?"

"No, I just didn't give you all the specific details."

"Like what?"

He shrugs. "We don't have a cottage—we have a lakeside palace. I didn't go to a one-room country school, but we did have a small class with a private tutor."

"Kind of a big difference."

"I truly do love you."

"Yeah, well, I saw *The Little Mermaid*. You could have given up all the magic and stuff to be with me."

"I would have—but that isn't an option for royalty."

"Right. Prince Edric."

"Don't make this harder than it needs to be," he says.

I shake my head. "No, I have the right to make this as hard on you as I want."

He nods. "I suppose you do."

I don't want it to be like this. Moments ago I was so angry—I'm still angry—but we had so much love between us. We gave each other seven years of our lives. You don't just walk away from something like that without trying to fix it.

I take a breath to steady myself.

"There's got to be a way around this," I say.

"There isn't. If there was any way I could fix it, I would."

"So you're just going to walk away from me—from what we have. Had."

"If I don't, they'll hurt you. I won't let that happen."

"We'll go to the police ..." I start to say, then realize how stupid that has to sound.

"And tell them what?" he asks. "They could hide us away, but the Court would find us. There's no place we could go that they wouldn't find us."

"And they would really hurt us—like kill us or something?"

He studies me for a long moment, then nods.

"I should go," he says.

I feel empty. And the only thing I can find to fill that emptiness is anger.

"Yeah," I tell him, my voice sharp. "They'll all be waiting on you."

"Mary, I—"

I put up my hand to stop him. It's still holding my makeshift club, so I throw it and its partner away.

"Don't," I tell him. "Don't say anything else."

He nods. He gives me another long look, then he steps to one side, and just like the fairy Court, he vanishes.

I've managed to hold back my tears, but now that he's gone, I go down on my knees on the top of that granite ridge and let them come.

IT TAKES ME A WHILE TO GET BACK TO WHERE I LEFT KAREN'S CAR. I GET turned around a few times, but I finally find the big field and from there on it's pretty easy. I half-expected to find a ticket on the car, or that it had been towed away by the highway patrol, but it's right where it's supposed to be.

I have another crying jag, once I'm behind the wheel. It's a long time before I can wipe my face on my sleeve and start up the engine.

I feel wrung out. Empty. Sadder than anyone has a right to feel.

And then the anger comes back.

I know Edric was right. I shouldn't have anything to with his changeling twin. But when I turn the car around, I don't head south, back into the city. Instead, I cut east, aiming the car for The Custom House in the little town of Sweetwater. That's the bar where Edric was supposed to be playing tonight. Where his changeling twin is playing.

I have a moment of disassociation when I step through the front door of the bar and see him on stage. Because I can't tell it's not him—Edric, I mean. He looks exactly the same. He plays exactly the same. It's not until the end of the set when I go up to the side of the stage as he's retuning his guitar that I see the difference.

Actually, there is no difference—at least nothing you can measure. It's in the way he looks at me. In the tone of his voice.

"You," he says.

I have to clear my throat, but when I do manage to speak, my voice is steady.

"Yeah, me," I say.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just had to see for myself."

He scowls at me.

"I'm the one who's real now," he says. "This is my life now."

I shrug.

"I'm grateful for the part you played in my getting it, but—"

"I'm not here for your thanks."

"—this ends here. We're not taking up together or anything."

I pull a face. "Like I'd want to."

"I'll just come get my stuff tomorrow, and that'll be it."

"You don't have any stuff," I tell him, "so don't bother."

His eyes narrow. "Well, then you don't have a car anymore."

"Fine. If you want the cops to pull you in for car theft, don't bring it back."

"Then I'll get a warrant to get my stuff back."

"I told you. You don't have any stuff. But Edric's crap is going to be sitting on the curb just as soon as I get home from here."

"I'm Edric now."

I shake my head. "No, you're not. You're just some pathetic little changeling that he grew out of a tree."

He takes an angry step toward me.

"Temper temper," I say. "You don't want the good people who came here buying into your peaceful guitar groove to find out you're really just a nasty little creep, do you?"

He glares, but he stays where he was and I leave the bar.

Well, that went well, I think as I get into the car. Venting like that was just so mature, wasn't it?

But it felt good.

I have another long cry before I start up the car and head home to put Edric's belongings on the curb.

"YOU KNOW," GWEN SAYS WHEN WE'RE SITTING IN THE HALF KAFFE Café the next day, "I didn't really mean that I was happy you were having problems."

"Yeah, I know."

I had Karen commiserating with me when I brought her car back earlier this morning. Mine was parked where it was supposed to be, on the street, with my resident's parking pass displayed on the dashboard. Edric's stuff was all gone—but whether the changeling got it, or street people, I don't know. Or care.

Now I've got Gwen figuratively holding my hand.

"So he really was having an affair," she says.

I didn't say anything to either her or Karen about changelings and fairy courts and the fairy tale geas that pushed Edric and I apart. I simply told them there'd been another woman—which wasn't entirely a lie. He just wasn't sleeping with her.

"He has this whole other life," I tell her. "It's been going on from before we even met and he won't—he says can't—give it up. So what am I supposed to do?"

"That sucks," she says, then she cocks her head. "And there you were, wanting me to ask Bill about his fixation with the Suicide Girls."

"I wouldn't bother," I say. "Not unless he starts listening to Goth music and starts talking about getting a tattoo or a piercing."

"As if." Then Gwen sighed and added, "You really just put all Edric's stuff out on the curb?"

"I wasn't going to keep it—and I didn't want to see him again."

Only it would be the changeling coming by, not Edric, and there's no way I can explain that without sounding completely mental.

"I'm still surprised you didn't want to try to work things out," Gwen says. "I mean, you of all people ..."

"I agree there are relationships you can work on, but for ours to stay good, either he or I would have had to have a complete makeover—and you know how I feel about that kind of thing."

"I agree there are relationships you can work on, but for ours to stay good, either he or I would have had to have a complete makeover—and you know how I feel about that kind of thing."

Gwen shakes her head. "I still don't get it. When we started going our separate ways back in high school, you didn't give up on us."

"That's because, for all our differences, we were actually willing to work on our friendship. You and me. It takes two."

"I guess. But you and Edric were together for seven years."

"During which time he had a secret life that he kept hidden from me. And he won't give it up, so what can I do?"

"I hate this," Gwen says.

She reaches across the table and gives my hand a squeeze. The rest of our conversation goes on much the way the one with Karen did, me saying I was okay, really; her being supportive and telling me if there was anything I needed, all I had to do was ask.

There's something I need, but she can't give it to me.

I need to turn back the clock, maybe.

Or I need to be a fairy girl myself—or at least someone who trusts her partner, without questions.

But I'm just not built that way.

I realize just how true that is when Gwen asks me, "If you could take it all back, would you?"

"Before or after the suspicions?"

"After, I guess. Before you had them, there wasn't a decision to be made, was there?"

"I guess not."

The problem is, she doesn't know the whole truth, the fairy tale puzzle lying underneath the mess that has become my life. I can't tell her or anybody without someone suggesting that I should check myself into the Zeb for a psychological evaluation. Maybe I should anyway, but I'm not going to.

"So would you? she asks.

I shake my head. "You know me. I can never let something just lie. I have to worry at until I understand."

The look in her eyes tells me she gets it.

"But that doesn't mean it hurts any less now," she says.

I think of the big ache that fills my whole chest and give her a slow nod.

"No," I agree. "It doesn't make it hurt any less." ❧

The Hotel Astarte

YOU CAN'T MAKE AN OMELETTE WITHOUT BREAKING SOME EGGS, AND YOU CAN'T BUILD A NATION WITHOUT RIPPING AWAY ITS SOUL AND CRUSHING SOME ARCHETYPES BENEATH YOUR HEEL.

I. LICORICE, OCTOBER 1929

A FARMHOUSE STANDS IN THE CENTER OF A THOUSAND ACRES OF CORN and wheat. It is a windy late-summer night, velvet blue with stars punched out of it. The darkness smells of turned earth and burrowing worms and the shiny carapaces of black beetles.

The farmhouse is white and well-built, trim and tidy and organized. Light blazes from its windows.

Inside the farmhouse, the King and Queen of the Midwest sit in an immaculate parlor. She is knitting and he is reading a farm paper. His heavy workboots are by the door; his feet, in red socks that she has knit from the finest silken wool, are propped on a [footrest embroidered] with roses and lilies.

A young man sits on the windowseat, elbows back on the sill, head turned to the darkness. Just nineteen, he is strong and young and blond as a haystack, but there has always been something in the way his eyes reflect the sky that the King of the Midwest does not recognize. Something strange that flashes sometimes when the young man is out in the fields, binding sheaves of slippery wheat. The Prince stares out across the inky black fields, eyes straining to see another light somewhere in the distance.

BY M.K. HOBSON ■ ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL GIBBS

What amused him was maneuvering others, ever

THERE IS A MAN COMING THROUGH THE FIELDS, SHOULDERING STIFF green blades aside with a rustling sound, his cracked black leather boots making dusty crunching sounds on the clods of dry earth. There is the whir and buzz of crickets around him. He is a dark man with fishpale skin and eyes the color of steel and aluminum and granite, eyes the color of cities, the color of the east. He wears a dusty black suit and he carries a watch on a chain.

He is dead.

THERE IS A LOUD KNOCK ON THE DOOR OF THE FARMHOUSE.

The Queen of the Midwest glances at her husband; strangers at night may bode ill, foreshadowing assassination or traveling salesmen.

"Who could it be?"

The King lifts his rifle from above the fireplace; the look on his face indicates that the visit is expected, but is no more desired for being so.

The Queen tucks away her yarnwork and goes to sit close to her son. Her son does not stir, but continues to stare out the window.

"A dark man," he murmurs to his mother, without looking at her. "A dark man from the east. Walking through the corn. He has been summoned."

The Queen's breath seizes. She cannot swallow. Her hands become ice. The palace shudders with her anxious dread; muffin tins and cream separators and sheaf-binding machines rattle.

But when the King opens the door, there is no one there, only the miles and miles of fields all around.

"Come in," the King speaks to the darkness, gruffly. "Come in, damn it. I have been waiting for you."

A strong gust blows past him, smelling of sulfur and tears and something else, something darkly bitter and sweet.

The King of the Midwest turns with the wind, and he sees his wife and the Prince looking at a man standing by the fireplace.

He is a dark man in a dark suit. Light shines through him, through the translucent paleness of his skin. His eyes glow like marsh-gas. He stares at her, at Columbia, Queen of the Midwest. She stares back, and it is a moment like one of the new electric lines that dip and sway next to the empty dirt roads; soft and tense and charged.

"Licorice," she exhales. She turns desperate eyes on her husband. "What have you done to him?"

"I didn't kill him," the King of the Midwest growls. His hand tightens around the polished walnut stock of his rifle.

"Why has he come here?" Columbia's cheeks burn crimson with old humiliation. His presence makes her remember all that she has tried so hard to forget for the past twenty years.

New York City. The Hotel Astarte.

How they had slept at odd intervals, wakeful in the darkest blue part of night. They had watched the sun rise and set over the tops of the surrounding buildings, glazing the deep carved limestone with lucent veils of peach and pink and purple. He had gone and not come back, and the hotel manager had pounded on her door, and she'd had no money to pay him. He had left her in a bed made of unpaid bills.

She had wandered through the city, crying on a bench in Union Square, bitterness leaking out of her. The land had suffered, crops had failed. Industrial concerns rose on the banks of rivers that had once been shaded by willow trees, smoking factories churned out pollution and foulness and mechanisms of despair.

The King of the Midwest had found her, in a small room with mold-blotched wallpaper. He had spoken her name with tenderness and pity, filling her with shame.

"Why," she whispers fiercely, remembered disgrace filling her with rage. "Why, after all these years?"

Your husband needs me, Licorice says. His lips do not move; the words hang softly in air, like exhaled smoke, subtly mocking. His Warlocks at the Grange Hall have summoned me back.

"Why?" Columbia demands of her husband, through clenched teeth.

"To kill the Emperor of the East," the King says.

II. COLUMBIA, JUNE 1910

At the Kansas State Fair, in the summer of 1910, Columbia met the Warlock who would ruin her.

She wore a thin white cotton dress, pintucked and embroidered, enfolding her fragrant golden flesh. Rich odors wafted from her, through the thin cotton; she was a fresh, erotic sachet wandering wide-eyed even in the glaring sunshine, candyfloss collapsing across the back of her loosely clenched fist.

Columbia, divinely fair, walking barefoot on the dusty earth.

Columbia, overflowing fecundity and bounty, a rich outpouring of friendliness and trust. She was promise and destiny; she had been painted a hundred times in classic drapery, one firm round breast uncovered, cornsilk hair streaming down her back. She was lush and luscious, curving in all directions. Her skin was like melted ice cream, slightly sticky and very sweet.

Columbia, Princess of the Harvest. The old men with tobacco-stained beards and stained overalls watched her like a prize milch cow. They leaned on fenceposts and watched her and spoke of royal nuptials, barn raisings, prosperity and good harvests. Weddings, gazebos, masses of cornflowers and sweetpeas, gingham tablecloths and fried chicken and fruit pies, bunting and fireworks and brass bands.

She paused before a display of watermelons, breathed a beneficent congratulation on a boy who'd nursed one of the slick green fruits larger than a copper washtub. The boy blushed with pride.

At the exact same moment, in another part of the fair, the man who would be the King of the Midwest was winning a threshing contest, sweat glittering across his broad shoulders. He was beautiful, strong and golden as she, with a throat of bundled copper and eyes as blue and fierce as the midday sky over the prairie. He was betrothed to Columbia, and had been since before each was born.

But it was Licorice who found her first.

HIS NAME WAS JACOB PHILADELPHIA. IT HAD BEEN JACOB MEYER, BUT he had converted to give his soul more worth when he came to sell it to the devil. She came to call him Licorice, because he was dark and chewy and strange and bitter.

He was a traveling Warlock, a salesman of patent magics who could dazzle onlookers with vivid recreations of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo or screaming harpies that descended from the sky clutching sheafs of creamy Lady Washington roses or refulgent, semi-illusory banners advertising the miracle powers of Madame Mehitabel's Miraculous Medicines. He had sold his soul to the devil because the devil seemed to want it more than God ever had, and was willing to pay a better price. He was whip-thin and dark, like a fibrous plant that did most of its growing at night.

He had been sent for her by hugely fat men in suits with watch chains that stretched across their gold-buttoned vests. Men who smoked cigars and had names that were initials; J.P., A.S., R.T.

They had uses for her.

"And that is all you need to know," said the Warlock of the Emperor of the East, who had promised to pay ten thousand dollars in gold notes. He wore a silk brocade waistcoat and had his

so skillfully, into eating their own hearts out.

fingernails polished by a mute Chinese woman he kept locked in a small room in his office on the top floor of the Gillender Building on Wall Street.

Jacob Philadelphia came to find Columbia after dark, when the electric lights came on and lit the cricket-whispering blackness with a thin yellow glow. He muttered powerful words of Compulsion, causing late fairgoers nearby to suddenly remember forgotten chores, horses that needed watering, parlors that needed dusting, bundt cakes and hot dishes that needed to be set out for the potluck supper. They scattered, deserting the midway, leaving it empty and trash-strewn.

He got her alone by the coin-operated fortune teller, the grotesque automaton of an old Hindu woman with a grimy silver turban and a bindi like a bloody thumbprint. Columbia had a silver coin in her hand and was staring at the machine, unmoving.

"Do you want to know your future?" he asked her.

She turned wide astonished eyes onto him.

"I already know everything that will ever happen to me," she said, realization and disappointment blossoming together.

"Maybe you do," he said, showing her a brief, brilliant smile, tantalizingly false, "... And then again, maybe you don't."

Under the dipping carnival lights of the traveling show, in a mud-baked field with brown grass and fluttering trash-wrappers and bit-ends of mustard-smeared corn-dogs, in Great Bend, Kansas, capital of the Midwest Empire, its palaces carved with cows and corn, he poured words into her white-shell ear.

Automat. Neon. Elevator.

There is nothing that security wants more than danger. There is nothing that satisfaction wants more than to be overturned.

They boarded the train for New York that night. She took nothing with her, not even shoes.

HE BROUGHT HER TO NEW YORK CITY, TO THE HOTEL ASTARTE: SMALL, discreet, and abundant. Silk curtains stirred in the warm afternoon wind, there was an exquisite table d'hote from which lavishly spiced dishes could be carried to the rooms at all hours. He had promised to feed her stars from golden plates and pour her glasses of moonlight from ruby ewers.

We have uses for her, the Warlock of the Emperor of the East had said. That is all you need to know.

Of course, Jacob Philadelphia knew what they intended. They did not have to tell him. They had hired him to bring Columbia to New York, where they would cut her body into a thousand pieces. They would put each piece into their formulations, grind her bones into dust, use the magic of her creation to fuel their machines. It was powerful magic, and the thought of its implementation had fascinated Jacob Philadelphia. He had wanted to be a part of that magic, to watch it and learn from it.

But that was before he had met her. Before he had memorized the shape of her lips by means of a hundred small glances, both furtive and overt.

He had promised her wonders. He had promised to show her Colossuses astride waterways that fizzed with lemon soda and diamonds glittering on storm grates. But he had lied to women before, made promises he did not intend to keep. It amused him to speak of pearls and brocade to greedy shopgirls and venal whores. But what amused him was the thwarting of their greed, the pricking of their covetousness, the deflowering of their expectations. What amused him was maneuvering others, ever so skillfully, into eating their own hearts out.

He paid to have a magnificent banquet laid out for her in the room at the Hotel Astarte, a banquet of the most wonderful things he could assemble or conjure; undead ortolans in raspberry sauce that sang in burbling tones, oysters that were more pearl than meat, red caviar that glistened like pebbles of polished garnet. She touched a dainty fingertip to each dish. The brilliantly saffroned yellow curry made her shiver; after sipping a mouthful of champagne, she rubbed her nose like a cat under a dripping eave. A cut-crystal dish held ropes of black licorice spraying out like black stalks of grass. She chewed the candy thoughtfully.

She looked at it all with admiration, but it was a strange kind of admiration. It was the same kind of admiration she'd shown to the boy with the watermelon. She was pleased that such things existed. She found them wonderful. But they had nothing to do with her, not really.

Without another glance at the wonderful dishes he'd arranged for her, she sat down in the middle of the floor, barefoot, and pulled an apple out of her pocket. She bit into it. She reached it up to him, offered him a bite. He took her wrist to pull her to her feet. But instead she pulled him down to her, the strength in her slender white arms surprising him.

"I want to know my future," she said, putting her face close to his, her lips smelling of apples and licorice.

You have no future, was all he could have said. But then his lips found hers, and his hand went to her firm warm waist, and wonder became brilliance blossoming with the brightness of ten thousand Fourth of July finales. When she sighed, it was like the sound of wind in lonely places. She was vast and encompassing, and her memory was short. She forgot him from moment to moment, and every impression he made upon her was new and fresh and miraculous. The wide-eyed brilliance of her trust made him feel that the future held far more for both of them than it actually did.

AND THE NIGHT THEY MADE LOVE FOR THE FIRST TIME, STRANGE flowers bloomed on the apple trees, and birds sang new and different songs, and the Warlocks of the King of the Midwest stopped their horses and leaned on their plows and looked up at the clouds, which were shaped like sighing lips and spilling hair, and they knew that something was very, very wrong.

III. THE EMPEROR OF THE EAST, OCTOBER 1929

Dawn; cold. Mid-October sunlight rising over shivering dew, the smell of autumn approaching on frost-rimed feet. Purple and blue, distant smoke and the smell of wormcast.

The Prince of the Midwest walks along a dusty road. The dead Warlock shuffles silently behind him, kicking up little dust tornadoes with each step. The Prince is heading into town, where his father's wheatstalk-chewing Warlocks will mutter homespun charms over him and then put him on a train to New York City. It has all been planned.

The Queen of the Midwest railed against his leaving. Against them all, against living men and dead men and their plots and schemes. Her son, her son! She threw things around the parlor and broke china.

"The boy must go," said the King of the Midwest. "My Warlocks have seen it. They have read this in the milk of the wheat, in the formation of the clouds, in the way the earth turns from the plowshare. He must do this." He spoke as if he were reciting an encyclical; eyes downcast, vaguely guilty.

"This is not his war!" the Queen cried. And who was she speaking of, her son or her dead lover?

"It is his, more than anyone's," said her husband. "He must go."

The King of the Midwest stroked a large, callused hand along her back. Licorice watched the movement, dark amusement like flames in his eyes.

"He will be killed," the Queen murmured.

Maybe he will, Licorice said. And then again, maybe he won't.

In the end, she could do nothing. She touched her son's chest with her slender white hand.

"I have given you everything," she murmured. "I beg you to keep it safe."

The Prince clasped his mother's hand, kissed her fingertips.

The King of the Midwest held her in his strong, honest arms and she sobbed against his broad shoulder as the two men, one living and one dead, walked away into the gathering dawn.

"Did you love her?" is the first question the Prince asks the dead Warlock, once they are far enough away from the farmhouse. His eyes are angry and puzzled.

The question makes the dead Warlock smile slightly, and it is a long moment before he answers.

HE LEFT HER AT THE HOTEL ASTARTE, LEFT HER SLEEPING WITH HER apple-colored cheek pillowed on her plump rosy forearm, and he did not come back.

He wandered through the early-morning streets, dropping charms of Misdirection and Confusion and Forgetfulness. He wandered like this for many hours, until there was nothing to connect him to Columbia anymore. Then he turned his steps toward Wall Street.

The Warlock of the Emperor of the East had thought that a man who had sold his soul to the devil could not fall in love. But he did not understand that a man who had sold his soul to the devil is more likely to fall in love, for he has nothing more to fear.

Jacob Philadelphia had fallen in love. He didn't even think of himself as Jacob Philadelphia anymore. He thought of himself as Licorice, for that was what she had named him. She had reinvented him. He had never fallen in love before, so it was surprising to him. Falling in love made him change his plans drastically.

He came to the Gillender Building on Wall Street, and rode the rattling elevator up to a meeting room with a long table. Men sat around the table, men in morning suits and cutaway waistcoats. They were a dark monotone mass, disapproving, vaguely shiny. Licorice stood at the foot of the brightly polished meeting table, alone.

"Where is she?" demanded the Warlock of the Emperor of the East. The Emperor himself sat at the head of the meeting table, behind a screen embroidered with Masonic symbols and other charms of power. From behind the screen, cigar smoke curled up into the air, blue and reeking.

"I have changed my mind," Licorice said. He reached into his pocket, threw handfuls of gold eagles onto the shiny wood surface. They clattered and skid. He shoved his hands into his pockets, lifted his chin. "She's gone. You won't find her."

Behind his screen, the Emperor of the East chuckled low, but said nothing. The Warlock of the Emperor of the East turned a shade of purple.

"You slimy fucker," the Warlock growled, his fingers digging into the wood of the meeting table. "Tell us where she is!"

"No," Licorice said.

The Warlock of the Emperor of the East lifted his gold-ringed hand, sketched curses in the air, sent them against Licorice with a bark. Licorice lifted his hand in a cross, but he knew it was futile. He was no one, a man without a country, a servant of kings, an assassin. He knew he could not defend himself there, in the Gillender Building, in the center of their power. He had known that even before he walked through the brass filigreed doors, into the black marble lobby. He had known, even then, that he was dead. The rest was mere formality.

They beat him to death in that room, twenty-two floors above Wall Street, those men with sticks and silver-headed canes. They beat him because he would not say the words: Hotel Astarte. The words would have saved his life, but he would not say them. They were his one bright thing.

The Lords of the East broke his nose, his fingers, his ribs, his neck. The thought of her, hidden and unreachable, comforted him as he died.

I DID NOT LOVE HER, THE DEAD WARLOCK SAYS FINALLY, HIS VOICE bitterly cold. I was an agent of the Emperor of the East. I humiliated her and broke her to serve his ends. The power of that humiliation has fueled their power for the past two decades.

The Prince shudders with revulsion.

"Then you deserved what you got," he says.

Certainly, the dead Warlock says.

"And why have my father's Warlocks summoned you?" The Prince asks. "Why you? And why now?"

I know better than to scry the motives of Kings, the dead Warlock says. But he knows, of course he knows. Even in death, Jacob Philadelphia is a great Warlock, and he sees many things.

The King of the Midwest and his Warlocks want the death of the Emperor of the East for pedestrian reasons: because newer and better machines have made the prices of crops fall, and the farmers have been forced to take credit to buy still newer and better machines simply to keep up; because farm women and children grow more and more dissatisfied each day, sick with longing for the shiny toys tantalizingly whispered-of by thousands of radios in small farm kitchens and living rooms; because their sons and daughters want to drink cocktails and smoke cigarettes and read French novels and dance the Charleston. The King of the Midwest is losing a war of dissatisfaction. Motorcars and capital move too swiftly, and the slow ways are being cut to ribbons beneath steel wheels.

But these are the reasons of Kings. The Prince surely knows all these reasons. They are not what he has asked.

Why him?

Because Jacob Philadelphia wants revenge, more keenly than anyone has ever wanted anything, ever. Those hard-handed, sunburned men, Warlocks of the King of the Midwest, they have seen that plain, seen that desire for revenge like an undeniable physical thing, like a clubfoot or a harelip. They have called him back because his desire for revenge is so powerful that he can use it to make the death of the Emperor of the East.

"And is the revenge you seek for yourself, or for her?" asks his son.

The boy is perceptive, the dead Warlock thinks with surprise. He is even more surprised to find that it makes him feel proud.

IN NEW YORK, THE DEAD WARLOCK AND HIS SON TAKE A SMALL ROOM. In the Hotel Astarte. The very same room. Not out of any kind of nostalgia; the place is a key part of the magic he must create. The magic that the Prince is key to.

Much has changed in the past twenty years. Once a genteel district, the neighborhood has run to seed. Automobiles rule the streets now, black honking boxes of steel and velour, and from open windows with cracked paint comes the sound of radios. Women rouge their knees and smoke cigarettes. The dead Warlock thinks of Columbia, rich and round and curved and buxom; all of those things are

He stares fixedly at the massive Corinthian columns,

gone from womanhood now and women are straight, flat, with short hair and boyish torsos.

Even the Prince is not immune to the times. He has purchased several moving-picture magazines and is reading them seriously in a corner of the room. They are all graced by a picture of the Queen of Hollywood, a young woman with bee-stung lips and a shimmering shingle bob. The Prince of the Midwest scrutinizes her picture.

The dead Warlock has assembled several things. Knives. Oyster shells. A shallow silver bowl.

"Do you think what you are doing is right?" The Prince asks, casually, without looking up.

I do not make such judgments, says the dead Warlock.

"I do," says the Prince. "Killing the Emperor of the East will have terrible consequences. It will hurt the whole country. The suffering will be immense. You know that, don't you?"

The dead Warlock says nothing.

"The King of the Midwest does not think deeply about such things," says the Prince. "He reacts like a seed grows in the soil; vigorously, and without thought."

That is why he has advisers, the dead Warlock says, carefully.

"His Warlock advisers are a bunch of hicks who think that knowing something about moon-cycles and crop-blessing gives them the right to meddle in politics." The Prince's words are surprisingly hard and vehement. The dead Warlock looks into the Prince's eyes. He is surprised at how blue they are, exactly the color of his mother's.

Then you won't help? he says.

"I didn't say that," the Prince says diffidently. Falling silent, he resumes flipping through the pages of his movie magazines.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE DEAD WARLOCK TAKES THE PRINCE TO 11 Wall Street, to the New York Stock Exchange, the Temple of the Emperor of the East. It glows in the smoky early morning sunlight.

In the twenty years that Jacob Philadelphia has been dead, the Emperor of the East has become vastly powerful. Millionaires are everywhere; they inhabit shoeshine shops and groceries and newsstands. There are new cars and new suits and new jewelry on women in new furs. Unimaginably tall buildings rise on pieces of land priced at $75,000 an acre.

Standing on the sidewalk, gaping up at the New York Stock Exchange building, they look like a couple of rubes. A passing newsboy appraises them critically, and is about to yell something mean when the Prince flashes him a warm dazzling smile. Words freeze in the boy's mouth. A puzzled feeling comes over him. He feels, suddenly, as if he's been part of something great.

The dead Warlock does not notice this. He stares fixedly at the massive Corinthian columns, white as refined sugar, like the bars of a prison window. Between them, glass shimmers, reflecting the dull angles of the surrounding buildings and tiny shards of blue sky. In the center of the pediment there is a woman of creamy marble. She is known as Integrity. Her features are like Columbia's; one of the Emperor of the East's cruel little jokes, no doubt. The dead Warlock frowns, looks away.

First, we must state our intention, he says, handing the Prince a piece of paper. The Prince unfolds it, looks at it critically.

"Out loud?" he lifts an eyebrow at the dead Warlock.

As loud as you like, the dead Warlock says.

The Prince nods, then clears his throat, throws out his chest, thrusts his chin toward the façade of white marble.

"Emperor of the East!" The Prince of the Midwest booms, waving an arm theatrically. "It is the intention of the King of the Midwest to destroy you, scatter your riches, raze your palace to the earth and sow salt among the ruins. Come forth now and treat with me!"

A few businessmen hurrying toward lunch stop to give the young man an odd look; a flock of pigeons rises up from the sill of a nearby building. The Prince and the dead Warlock stand on the sidewalk, wait for a few minutes, until finally the dead Warlock grunts satisfaction.

He can't say that he wasn't warned.

THAT NIGHT, PRECISELY AT MIDNIGHT, JACOB PHILADELPHIA CUTS THE hand of the Prince of the Midwest with an obsidian knife. He holds the young man's hand over a shallow silver bowl. The blood drips down with fat, chiming pings.

While the young man bandages up his hand, Jacob Philadelphia burns tickertape that he has collected from behind brokerage houses and chants words of power through the smoke. He grinds the oyster shells, an ancient symbol of the money that built this city, into a powder that he throws into the flame, making it glow blue. With the tip of a needle, he pierces both ends of a rooster's egg and blows out the good insides, leaving nothing but an empty shell.

These are all just mechanics, though. While he does all of these things, he is remembering Columbia.

He puts all his love for her into the spell. All of it, glad to be rid of it, but the more he puts in, the more is left. Love is so troublesome that way.

He puts in the smell of her hair and the milky smoothness of her belly and her eyes, clear summer blue.

The glow of it fills the room, smelling of apples and licorice, lighting the dead Warlock's pale features in such a way that he seems almost alive again.

The Prince pauses in bandaging his hand. He is enraptured, astonished.

"You did love her," the Prince says, amazed at the power of it, as the magic causes the whole memory of what happened to unfold before him, the truth unfurling across his memory like a photoplay. Dismay and delight mingle in his voice. "Oh, mercy. How you loved her."

The dead Warlock says nothing. There is nothing to say. Denials are futile, and assent would be ludicrous, like agreeing that the sun was warm, or air was good for breathing.

The whole room glows with the power of the dead Warlock's craft.

white as refined sugar, like the bars of a prison window.

Brilliant light streams out of the small windows into the night, illuminating the neighborhood. People in nearby buildings go to their windows, trying to determine the source of the glare. The light is soft and round, as if the moon had come to perch atop the Hotel Astarte like some kind of strange advertising gimmick.

A storm gathers over the city, like the summer storms that sweep over the plains, fast and rushing. Thunder rumbles, lightning flashes, and tickertape and ash and apple blossoms rain down to clog the gutters of Wall Street.

OCTOBER 24, 1929.

Panic comes with the dawn.

Sell! Sell, for the love of God!

The whole city rings with the words. Tickertape machines smoke and smell strangely of burnt licorice and rotten apples; investors everywhere find themselves hungry and yet unable to fill their stomachs. Everywhere they look, their minds see emptiness; empty eggshells, empty pockets, empty cigarette packs, empty, empty, everything empty.

Sell! Sell, for the love of God!

Thousands gather outside the exchanges and brokerages; police assemble with truncheons and black mariahs, uncertain what they should do against these terrified masses, driven mad by the emptiness they feel all around them, above them, about them, within them. Men are already jumping from windows, but not as many as will come later.

At the offices of J.P. Morgan and Company, the Lords of the East meet in close conference. Statements are issued. Newspapermen take the words down diligently, their hands trembling.

The Warlock to the Emperor of the East clenches his teeth as he makes a paste of corpse dust and wheat stalks and cupfuls of blood from the bluest veins of the richest men in New York. He smears this paste onto the forehead of J.P. Morgan and Company's floor broker, growling harsh, sandpaper-edged charms of Solidarity and Reinforcement as he does so.

"Go," he barks at the man, giving him a shove. "There is no time to lose."

The floor broker of J.P. Morgan and Company, anointed with all the power his Masters can summon, walks onto the exchange floor in a trance, his steps halting and stiff. The crowd on the floor falls silent; panicked brokers look at the man's glassy eyes and shudder. The Lords are pulling out the big magic, they whisper to each other. But which direction will it go?

In a low, hypnotic tone the floor broker asks for the price on U.S. Steel.

"$195," says a man at his elbow, who has been crying.

"I am buying at $205," the floor broker says, mechanically. "10,000 shares. 10,000 shares at $205."

In an instant, fear evaporates, collapsing inward on itself, and everyone who has been in the grip of terror now sees that the emptiness they have feared is nothing but a hollow shell of illusion. Jubilation bubbles up in little pockets all over the trading floor, smelling of hope and $100 bills, and brokers whose faces are grimy from the dust of thousands of losing transactions now embrace each other with relief. This is big magic. It will shelter them all.

The floor broker of J.P. Morgan and Company receives his 200 shares immediately. He smiles and nods, his eyes glassy and blank, and he leaves the rest of his order in the hands of one of his specialists. Then he stumbles from the trading floor, his movements puppetlike and jerky. No one sees as he retreats into an antechamber and falls to the ground, contorted in agony. He has been the channel of all the magic that the Warlock to the Emperor of the East could summon; he has been like a steel tube through which the blast of a smelting furnace has been directed.

It was likely he will not survive.

But the markets, the markets move upward like a skyrocket, fears of a crash thwarted.

IN THE SMALL ROOM AT THE HOTEL ASTARTE, THE DEAD WARLOCK SITS staring at the floor, at copies of the *Wall Street Journal* spread out across the acanthus carpet. He is slumped; his hand rests over his mouth, as if he is trying to keep his despair from escaping.

The Warlock to the Emperor of the East is more powerful than he remembered.

"Come on, you can't give up," says the Prince, who has bought himself a bagful of apples from a corner store and is sitting with his feet up, eating them one by one. He is cutting the apples into wedges using a silver knife; the same knife that the dead Warlock used draw his blood with. There is a strange false cheerfulness to his voice that irritates the dead Warlock.

What more can I do? asks the dead Warlock, clenching his teeth. What more?

The Prince sighs, staring at his father.

"You really did love her," he says again.

I will forever, the dead Warlock says. But it is not enough. Dry dusty tears gather at the corners of his eyes.

"You mustn't say that," said the Prince, very softly. He sits up, holding the knife loosely in his hand. He unbuttons his snowy white shirt, baring a smooth expanse of young chest. "I want to show you something."

He touches the tip of the silver knife to the tanned flesh over his breastbone. He pushes with a grunt, driving the knife into his chest. He pulls the blade up, cutting.

The dead Warlock cries out, but some magic keeps the young man standing, unharmed and unconcerned. There is no blood; only a jagged hole. Licorice watches as his son reaches into his chest and pulls out two hearts. One of the hearts is shattered and fragmented, like rutilated crystal. The other heart surrounds it, holds it together, intertwined like honeysuckle growing around an oak tree.

"My mother's heart," the Prince says softly, "... and my own. Her heart was broken. My heart gave it strength." He pauses. "She would have done anything to keep me from giving it to you. It never knew the truth. Now it does, and now you must have it. It is yours, and always has been."

Licorice takes the two hearts in his pale, trembling hands. He clasps them to his chest, closing his eyes. He feels them beating, thunderous and fragrant. He wishes his own heart were still beating so that it could answer them.

"You can work a great magic with them," says the Prince, buttoning up his shirt. His voice is flat, tight. "Greater than the Warlock to the Emperor of the East can imagine."

The dead Warlock shakes his head.

I cannot take them, the dead Warlock says, finally. If I use them, they will not be yours to reclaim—neither hers, nor yours.

"I know," says the Prince.

It is too great a price, says the dead Warlock.

"My mother has found a life where she needs no heart," the Prince said. "She can live without it."

But you? The dead Warlock is worried about this boy. He is surprised to find that he loves him as much as he ever did Columbia, the love for them both all intertwined like the two beating hearts he holds in his hands.

The Prince flashes a smile, brilliant and unreadable.

"Me?" the Prince says. "I am an agent of the King of the Midwest. I exist only to serve his ends."

Licorice stares at his son for a long time, scrutinizing those brilliant blue eyes, so like those of his mother, but with something else in them, something dark and strange. Something the dead Warlock recognizes as his own.

The dead Warlock nods his head. Then he drops the entwined hearts into the shallow silver bowl, rolling up his sleeves to begin the greatest magic he has ever worked.

OCTOBER 29, 1929.

This time, there is no answer.

The Warlock to the Emperor of the East slaughters goats and burns yachts in the Harbor and deflowers virgin showgirls and chants every incantation he has ever learned or devised and still, the market plummets, and brokers wail and rend their garments, and the marble of the New York Stock Exchange sizzles and stinks of smoke and decay and rot.

The Lords of the East hold one final meeting.

Jacob Philadelphia and the Prince are summoned.

and built themselves from light and illusion . . .

They all reek of panic, the Lords of the East, a smell compounded of stale sweat and fast-bolted whisky and cigar smoke and red ink.

Jacob Philadelphia stands at the foot of the brightly polished meeting table, where he stood once before. This time, though, his son is beside him, tall and strong. The young man smiles faintly, amused by the desperation he sees laid before him.

"We will capitulate," says one of the men, a bald fat little man who continually mops his brow with a sodden handkerchief. He speaks these words to the Prince of the Midwest. "Call off your attack, we implore you! Your father has sent word to treat with us. You must comply!"

"I will do as I choose," says the Prince.

The Emperor of the East gestures, and his retainers lower the veil that screens his face. The embroidered velvet, figured with Masonic symbols and charms of power, falls away, revealing a very shrunken old man in a towering leather chair.

"Must I plead with you personally, boy?" he says, bitterly. He looks very ill, thin and sallow. His cheeks are like carved-out bowls. A cigar burns between his fingers, but the smoke makes him cough hackingly. It is clear that he will not survive the week if the magic is not reversed. "I will do anything you ask."

"I ask nothing," says the Prince of the Midwest.

"Then you will call off this attack!" cries the Warlock of the Emperor of the East. "You will order your ... creature ..." he gestures in disgust at the dead Warlock, "... to reverse his spell!"

Jacob Philadelphia braces himself. He knows the ways of Kings. The King of the Midwest has brought the Emperor of the East to his knees. Now, the Prince will treat, make bargains, offer terms. This, then, this moment is his revenge. It will have to be enough.

It is all I can offer you, Columbia.

The dead Warlock closes his eyes and lifts his chin, and waits for the Prince to give him the word that he knows must come. The word of Mercy.

"The attack is not mine to call off," says the Prince of the Midwest.

The dead Warlock's eyes fly open; he stares at his son.

"I am a man without a country," the young man continues, his smile snowy and chill. "I am like my father. The heart of the Midwest once beat in my chest; it beats there no longer. I am no one, gentlemen."

Around the table, men in suits shift in terror and dismay. The Emperor of the East coughs, bringing a handkerchief to his lips; the white linen is spotted with blood when he draws it away.

"You will destroy both of our kingdoms!" The Emperor of the East climbs to his feet; his retainers hurry to help him, anxious hands slid under his armpits. "Both our kingdoms! You will bring misery and despair to hundreds of thousands of innocent people!" The Emperor of the East snaps his fingers at his Warlock; the pompous fat man scurries to reveal a very large crystal ball in which images swirl and cluster. Farm foreclosures, evictions, auctions, all clouded in swirling dust, failed crops, drought.

"There is no cause for such misery," The Emperor of the East says, softly. "You must see reason. I beg you."

The Prince shakes his head.

"Both your kingdoms are dying kingdoms, and these are old squabbles. I have set my sights on a new empire, one that I can win for myself."

He pauses.

"I am going West."

And then, all in an instant, Jacob Philadelphia sees the future his son will create. The dead Warlock sees it all, sees the future unfolding in shadows projected through celluloid.

Prince Philadelphia, that is the name he will take.

He will join other men who have left their lands and built themselves from light and illusion, men with names like Zukor and Thalberg and Selznick. With them, he will build a rich and powerful empire, one that is not subject to the vicissitudes of arbitrage or the rain that waters crops. He will be one of the rulers of the richest Empire the world will know, a Lord of Hollywood, an empire that will outshine all those that came before it. He will board an airplane to Hollywood, and he will never look back.

"We will recover," says the Emperor of the East, sinking back into his chair. "We will recover eventually. And we will never forget this outrage."

"You may not forget," says the Prince, "but you will have no choice but to forgive." He tipped his hat to the men around the table, and snapped his fingers at the dead Warlock, summoning him to follow. "Good day, gentlemen."

The looks on their faces make the dead Warlock laugh, laughter which he can't bring under control even as they're walking out of the building, onto Wall Street, where brokers are still throwing themselves out of windows like sacks of corn.

IV. PRINCE PHILADELPHIA, OCTOBER 31, 1929

The dead Warlock and his son stand together in Newark, New Jersey, waiting for the airplane that will take Prince Philadelphia to the West Coast.

All around them, people talk of stock losses, the bubble burst, the crash. Headlines in huge type scream about it; the papers flutter, discarded, around the field. The Prince pays no attention to any of this detritus. His pockets are stuffed with movie tabloids, telephone exchange numbers, and an invitation to present himself at some strange exotic place called Pickfair.

He is wearing sunglasses and smoking a cigarette in a black bakelite holder. There is the bulge of a flask in his pocket. He has prepared himself well.

"What will happen to you?" the Prince asks his father.

I am as dead as the century, says Jacob Philadelphia. What more can happen?

The Prince watches as the American Airlines airplane taxis toward them, twin propellers beating the dawn.

"We have done great things," the Prince says. "Perhaps someday, you will come West. You could be of great service to me."

The dead Warlock shakes his head.

I don't think so, he says.

The Prince exhales smoke. It curls around his head.

"We have done great things," he says again, with an air of self-satisfaction that befits a much older, fatter man.

I only hope the price was not too great.

The Prince shrugs.

"I don't need one heart, let alone two," says the Prince. "Not where I'm going."

There is a long silence between them. The Prince finally breaks it, making a remembering noise and digging into a new leather satchel he's purchased, along with a Remington typewriter.

"I have my first script," says the Prince, showing a bound sheaf of paper to the dead Warlock. On the title page, in blocky black letters, centered:

The Hotel Astarte.

"Douglas Fairbanks will play the Warlock, and Mary Pickford will play the farmgirl." the Prince says. "If you have no objections."

The dead Warlock nods, feels himself rising away like a bird from two cupped hands.

None at all, he says. ❧

sometimes the things that surround us every day, the things we think we know the most about, turn out to be the things we know the least. sometimes we need to learn fast.

Pennsylvania Dragon

BY STEPHEN CHAMBERS

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS COCOZZA

"DON'T FEED ME THAT LINE," Mandy said. They were driving north on State Road 6, the F-150's headlights fuzzy in the nighttime fog. "I know what happens at those parties—you go in for a few drinks, and you come out with some whore on your—"

"It's a bachelor party, where are we supposed to throw it, at Saint Mark's?"

At Redhorn Road, Paul turned right, deeper into evergreen forest. He glimpsed a deer through the brush and switched to a lower gear down the slope and around the corner near the Fisher's Lake. This Ford pickup knew these roads; Paul could drive 'em in his sleep.

"So go," Mandy said, and she squeezed Paul's hand. "Only don't catch nothing."

The crucifix on the rearview swayed as they banked back around the bend of rusted car frames at Bete Smith's trailer.

Paul smiled. "I was at the bank, after I got off work. I think next summer, maybe." He counted on his fingers at the top of the steering wheel. "You got the house, the wedding, and I know we talked about Atlantic City, but what if we waited? The money'll be there next May."

Mandy thought about it. "We'd still be married, in our own place ..." She kissed him. "Before I'm twenty-five. You sure we can do it?"

"Yeah ..." He swallowed as they neared a Chevy truck parked in front of his parents' house. "The hell is this?"

The chicken-man was just leaving. Paul's Pop watched from the front door of the one-level ranch as the chicken-man—wearing a corduroy coat and faded jeans—returned to his red pickup. Paul eased into the gravel drive, and the chicken-man waved. "How you doing, Paul? You been working out—we got James Bond over here or what? Hear that son-of-a-bitch Matt is finally getting hitched. That true?"

"Looks like," Paul said. The chicken-man hopped into his truck. "You have a good one, Paul. I'll see your dad next week." Next week? Paul and Mandy went to the front door. "Next week, Pop?" Pop waved the words away and limped into the den, where Paul's Ma said, "He was at the tables again today when he should have been running those air conditioners for Mr. Adams."

"Ah, the way you tell it, I'm always wrong," Pop said.

Ma noticed Mandy and smiled. "I'm sorry, dear, I didn't even see you there."

"Any fool could see she's with him," Pop said.

Ma and Mandy went into the kitchen to finish dinner. Loud commercials sang on a grainy television at the far wall. They still hadn't gotten a set with a remote, so Paul twisted the dial to silence the volume.

"Now you want to bust my balls?" Pop said.

Everybody paid the chicken-man. Back in the 1930s, when Pakard started up, the first chicken-man had collected semi-annual dues from the miners along the Blue River, and when they couldn't pay in cash, he took livestock—'s where the name came from. Some places maybe he still collected chickens. People who didn't pay had accidents, lost their houses to fire and flood and twisters that somehow missed the whole rest of Pakard. Without the chicken-man, cars skidded on January ice and those spots on your cheeks became cancer, and so it had never mattered to Paul who the chicken-man worked for—Pop gave him envelopes once in June, once in December, and sometimes the chicken-man left presents for Paul or honey-baked hams for Ma, and that was that.

"You lose a lot?" Paul asked.

"Nah, I had worse runs. Turn it back up, my show's starting."

Paul lowered his voice. "We're getting married next year."

Pop stared distantly at the TV. "That's great, she's a good girl, 'cept how are you going to ..."

"I got it counted out. The money from the jobs—next May will be eight years, and we'll get that house over on Culbertson."

Ma and Mandy came in.

"Did he tell you?" Ma asked Pop. "Get up, you old fart. We got to celebrate."

"Sure we do," Pop said and took Paul's shoulder. "Help me get the scotch."

They went back to Pop's workroom. Cluttered with flood-soiled boxes and walls of dangling tools—hammers and nails and saws and thirty-eight sized screwdrivers—Pop's room never felt as rumble tumble as it looked, not to Paul.

Pop found a key on the wall hook and knelt to open the glass corner cabinet where he kept old bottles of anniversary liquors, baseball cards Grandpa had left him, and the heavy .45 six-shooter that Paul still thought of as a cowboy gun. Sure, Pop had the twelve-gauge at the top of his closet, over the water heater, alongside the strongbox with the Luger Grandpa brought back from France in 1945, but that six-shooter was the shit. A hand cannon, Pop called it. A peacemaker.

Without looking up from the cabinet, Pop said, "She ain't pregnant, is she?"

"Nah, we're waiting."

"Sure." Pop barked a laugh, stared at the .45 and bullet boxes. "When's the last time you went hunting?"

"What?"

"You out of practice?"

"Nah," Paul said. "With Matt, back in deer season ..."

"A year ago?"

"Yeah, why?"

Pop rolled up his left sleeve to expose the hairless sheen of puckered scar tissue that snarled from his forearm up to his shoulder. "'s itching me today."

"Pop, how much you lose?"

"Too much," Pop said. "You know, that bastard's going to want more than another arm."

Paul's chest shrank a little on his lungs, made it harder to breathe. There'd been an accident in the mine back before he was born. Three other guys died, he'd been told. Pop had escaped with a puffy arm he had to keep out of the sun. But then, twelve hours a day in an anthracite mine, dragging coal to the breakers, was no way to live safe. Guys had died down there all the time—came with the territory, didn't it?

Paul said, "Was an accident—"

"Yeah, sure." Pop shook his sleeve down. "Some accident. Should've known he'd want to take more after-later ..."

"What, the chicken-man—"

"Fuck the chicken-man. You think he'd bury three guys down there and do this shit to me? He lives in Robertsville, your Grandpa played bridge with his uncle. Before he was the chicken-man, his name was Ron, little Ronnie—you think he'd do that when he's a goddamn ten-year-old? Use your head, numbnuts." Pop grabbed the scotch, limped for the hall. "Who do you think he collects for?"

Pakard was like a fern brought inside for the winter, slowly dying in the gray light, shedding leaves of rusted cars and barren storefronts.

The mob, Paul thought. Or for some crooked state police or politicos in Philly. "I don't know—who?"

"Ah." Pop snorted. "You're lucky you ain't had to grow up yet."

"Fuck you."

Pop stopped in the doorway. "What?"

"Ain't had to grow up'? What do you think I been doing?"

"When I was your age," Pop said, "we had our own place and two cars already."

"And the mine was open, wasn't it?"

Ma and Mandy came down the hall.

"What are you boys shouting about?" Ma said. "Come on now—"

"So go somewhere where there's work then," Pop said. "You think I'd a sat around in some dumbshit town banging out walls for a living? Sleeping in my old man's house?"

"Hey," Ma said. "What are you saying to the boy—you stop that, come in here."

"Don't handle me, woman. Get your hand off." Pop pulled away again, and when Ma reached for him—"Just come in—"—he smacked her into the wall with the back of his hand.

Stunned, Ma slipped to the floor. "You ..."

"Ah." Pop stepped over her, and Mandy backed out of his way. "She's got the right idea. You"—he pointed the scotch bottle at Paul—"out of my house. I don't want to know where you go, got it?" He slammed the door behind him.

Paul said, "What ..."

"I don't know," Ma said. "I ain't never seen him—"

The front door banged open again, and Pop called in, "Paul, move your lemon fucking truck! You blocked me in!"

AFTER SPENDING THE NIGHT ON MANDY'S TOO-SMALL WATERBED IN HER parents' finished basement, Paul was back at the warehouse site by daybreak. Pop's moods were rough sometimes, Paul thought, but he must'a lost bad at the tables. Across the grass median that separated the parking lot from the factory knockdown, there were dry grass holes in the early morning frost. Burning hot today. Since it had closed up in 1992, there'd been a mine fire under Pakard. Nobody knew how bad it was, and back in '96, when they'd brought out state inspectors, there'd been an official safety notice in the *Pakard Times-Journal,* and some folks whose houses or backyards stank of sulphur and coal smoke had had to move on account of their kids. The hot spots changed from year to year, and in the wintertime, there were funny-looking bald spots in the eighteen-inch snowdrifts that stuck around until late-March.

Back in the 1950s, when the interstates had side-swiped and split the Pennsylvania hills, they'd missed Pakard by a good twenty miles, and sure, the railroad line still cut through the woods alongside State Highway 6 into the center of town, but when the mine closed up, all those shops and motels and restaurants along Market Street had closed or traded homemade pancakes for $9.99 liquor. There was only one Shell station on Market and Maple—with a twenty-cent markup from the gas pumps along the interstate. Too far from Philly or Pittsburgh to attract industry, too distant from the fast-lane highways to draw tourists, Pakard was like a fern brought inside for the winter, slowly dying in the gray light, shedding leaves of rusted cars and barren storefronts.

Most nobody lived downtown in the wood-hill valley now. Amid the parking lots and Blue River bridge still topped by a sign that read "Jesus: Coming Soon" the only draws were the tables at Sawyer's Restaurant, the discount grocery store, laundromat, post office—closed on Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday—Saint Mark's Catholic Church and Shine's Girls on the northside. Houses and trailers were all upland or in the East Hollow. The closest schools and paychecks were a good thirty miles southeast along Interstate 81. Every five years, when the *Pakard Times-Journal*—a three-page weekly pamphlet—sent out housing questionnaires, they revised the local population: most recently, it'd been 781 and falling.

"There he is," Matt said to Paul. "Shine's next Friday? Mandy don't mind?"

"Nah."

They were working the old warehouse on 8th and Oak. Place had been closed dark fourteen years, since almost before the mine closure in '92 so it didn't have the same excuse as the rest of Pakard, Pennsylvania. Paul couldn't remember ever seeing this two story rathouse open for anything other than kids with ten dollar whiskey flasks. Wasn't much left of it now. They'd opened the roof, hacked up the second floor wraparound wearing vent masks, and were now breaking down the ground wall. By tomorrow night, the factory would be a shabby lot surrounded by run-down apartments, liquor corners, and the five and dime over on Maple that was still going, though God only knew how. In two weeks, they had another teardown—the sheriff's wife wanted that flophouse near Blue River gone before the holidays. No sweat.

"My old man lost bad at the tables," Paul said.

"He say how much?"

"Nah."

That night, Paul called to ask his mother.

"I don't know, Paulie. You know your Pop—stubborn like a mule sometimes." She tried to laugh.

The next week was the same. Mandy's parents didn't complain, but on Wednesday night in bed, she asked, "How much longer you think he's going to do this?"

"How should I know?"

The upstairs phone rang. A long heartbeat, it rang again, and they heard Mandy's mom through the ceiling, "Hello?" A pause. "I am so sorry. Yes, if there's anything ... Yes, we understand. My heart just goes out to you, it really does. Sure, just one second ..." The door at the top of the basement stairs opened, and Mandy's mother called, "Paul, come up here a minute."

He didn't move, and Mandy nudged him.

"Paul?"

So long as I don't get up, I don't know, Paul thought.

"Yeah ma, he's coming," Mandy said. "Go on, lazy ass."

"Yeah."

AT THE WAKE ON THURSDAY, MOST EVERYBODY CRIED, AND AT THE funeral on Friday, Ma clenched Paul's hand as Pop's casket went into the ground, and three gunners in full uniform fired into the air while bagpipes played. They folded the American flag, gave it to Ma on behalf of a grateful nation—Pop got bit in the right thigh by a quarter-size shrapnel flake in Vietnam. Ma just quietly wept throughout. Paul was okay until the gunfire—for some reason, the moment they raised those rifles and snapped off the shots all the numb disbelief folded right over and spilled down his cheeks. When the ceremony ended, they left the little cemetery-tent, and Paul drove them home. More flowers and fruit baskets were tucked behind the screen door.

The wake had been closed casket: the wreck had been a bad one. Without a seatbelt on, he'd been thrown straight through the front windshield. He'd been doing eighty-five at least, the police said, hit that big pine tree head-on, so that it split the '95 Ford Escort straight down the middle, like a knife through a piece of bread.

"I think I need to sleep," Ma said after Paul shut the front door. "You done good, both of you. Go out and get a bite."

Reluctantly, they left her, and back in the truck, Mandy said, "Want you to go to that titty party tonight."

He'd forgotten. "Nah."

As Paul backed out, she said, "It ain't your fault."

He switched gears. "Never thought it was."

"HEY SWEETIE, I'M ROSE." SHE SHOOK HER HAIR ONTO HER CHEST IN golden curls and held the back of his chair to lean close enough that he smelled her sweat and woodfire perfume, felt the heat of her skin through the half-open shirt, saw a string of silver Mardi Gras beads above the pearl-curl of her breasts in that red bikini top loop-tied with long, fabric-ears dangling down her suntanned belly to a checkered miniskirt riding high on her hips; she eased onto his lap, rolled her hips with the bouncing, stringy music. A voice whispered a Spanish phrase behind the underwater drums and hypnotic guitar.

Shine's was dark, the red and purple lights tracking the girls onstage. It was late; Paul was drunk, and he'd lost sight of Matt and the guys in the smoky haze. Rose slipped her shirt off her shoulders, let it fall so he could look at her breasts and the bead-necklace. "You ain't John Schmidt's boy, are you?"

"Yeah," he said.

"I thought you looked like him." She untied her bikini, and it fell away from hard, perfect nipples.

"My Pop ..."

"Yeah, he comes in here all the time. What's wrong, honey?"

Paul swallowed. The room was spinning. "He's—he came in here?"

"Sure he does," she said.

As far as Paul knew, Pop had never been to a strip club, spent his time away from the hardware store with old Phil and a few brews, or at the tables over on 6th—always at those fucking tables, except maybe he hadn't been. He'd been here instead. Rose's nails bit into Paul's wrist—she was staring past him, at a man in a coat.

"You can't come in here," Rose murmured. "'s my territory."

The Mexican song rattled and throbbed over the man's voice, and she released Paul's hand, said, "Your father's dead?"

Paul turned: the chicken-man was smiling.

"Yeah," Paul said.

"I'm sorry," Rose said. "I didn't know."

"Thanks, honey," the chicken-man said. "I won't be long with your pal here. Move along now."

She picked up her clothes and gave Paul a final, uncomfortable look—the look folks use when they leave their dog at the vet's.

The chicken-man pulled up a chair. "You want a beer?"

Paul told the nervous pulse in his chest to calm down. "Nah, 's fine."

"Sorry about your dad—that was too bad. Stand-up guy, your dad. Sometimes though, ah hell, I don't need to tell you—sometimes your dad could be a real ball-buster, you know? Thing is, Paul, much as I loved your dad, not everything was settled between us. Guess he told you he'd been losing at the tables, right? Still has a tab, you know, and if it were me, I'd say, 'God rest his soul. What's done is done, right?' But, problem is, Paul, it ain't just me. You understand? Thought you would. You're a smart fucking guy. Your dad got in over his head—it happens to lots of good people, and so we just got to go from here, right?"

"How much did he owe?" Paul asked.

"Hey," the chicken-man called to a waitress in lingerie. "Get us some Buds over here, would you beautiful?"

"How much?" Paul asked again.

The chicken-man shrugged. "Fifteen grand."

Paul's stomach clenched. He was going to be sick, and the chicken-man saw it coming. "Hey, hey—don't you fall over on me."

By the end of the year, Paul would have eleven thousand dollars in his savings account. He'd have twelve by next May. Eight years of stashing and storing and staying home at night because every restaurant bill, every new shirt was ten, fifteen bucks they could be saving. Twelve grand would be enough for the wedding and a fat down payment on the house on Culbertson; it was enough to start a new life, to start a family.

"Your beers," the waitress said.

"Thanks, you keep that." The chicken-man gave her a ten. "Sounds like a lot," he told Paul. "But it ain't—not really."

Paul wondered how many chickens fifteen grand could buy. "I don't believe you. How could he run up that big a tab?"

The chicken-man smiled. "He did, Paul. Don't do no good to wonder why he did what he did. Your mom still has the Buick, don't she? That's a 2001, only a few years. You got a savings account? Maybe for you and Mandy—planning for the future, that's good." The chicken-man lowered his voice, his eyes empty and disinterested, as if Paul were a stuck door handle. "I told him you'd be smart, that you understand consequences. I didn't lie, did I Paul?"

Paul shivered, looked away. "Nah."

"Okay." The chicken-man clapped Paul's knee and stood. "I'll let you get back to your pussy show or whatever, and I'll see you tomorrow. For two grand, let's say. So's he knows the rest is coming. Enjoy the beer."

When he left, the song ended, and Matt sat beside Paul.

"There he is. Where've you been, asshole?"

"Right here," Paul said.

"You get a lapdance yet?"

"Yeah."

"Good for you—'s good you fucking get out. That was some shit with your Pop, huh? Six hours in a fucking ditch with birds pecking your eyes and rooting through your guts. Most guys would have died going through the glass is what Andy's cop friends say, but not your old man—he hung on until they got him in the back of the fucking ambulance. You imagine that? Jesus Christ, I'm fucking drunk, can't believe I'm getting married tomorrow. Ready to go?"

Paul didn't see Rose anywhere. "Yeah."

"Six hours in the mud—you believe it?"

"No," Paul said. "I can't."

MANDY SWIRLED HER MORNING COFFEE. "WISH YOU'D SIT DOWN—didn't you sleep none?"

Paul shook his head, hovered behind a kitchen chair. He felt weaker somehow—as if the lack of sleep had sucked some of the marrow from his bones—and he'd sobered up, sure, but that only made things worse. "Fifteen—"

"So maybe it won't be so bad." Mandy didn't look surprised, as if she'd expected something to come along, yank the rug out from under their future. "Just like a loan we got to pay off."

"He wants two today."

"Don't shout unless you want to wake your Ma," Mandy said. "Hey. Look at me—you don't look good. Drank too much, huh? We got the two. My dress is picked out for this afternoon."

The wedding was scheduled for two o'clock. I feel different, Paul thought. Cold—except I ain't cold. After he put on the rented wedding suit, Paul drove out to the crash site, his fingers jumpy on the wheel as he searched the treeline. He pulled over, hopped out. Should be here, right? He looked up and down the empty woods. Yeah, this was it. There. One of the trees near the road was checked with narrow gashes, like somebody'd taken a bowie knife to it. The cuts weren't deep: tough fucking tree. Paul stepped to the lip of a ditch with a dry creekbed at the bottom. He'd known he wouldn't find nothing; police had done their job and cleared it all away, but a part of him had hoped to discover something—a glass sliver, shirt shred, something he could pick out of the pine needle-mud and take home. Some proof that Pop had died here. Not going to happen, though.

Wait. He knelt, cleared a patch of crumbly leaves and found a silver pellet, a bead. Was heavier than it looked. Huh. So Pop did visit ...

A Chevy truck came around the bend, slowed on the shoulder. Smiling, the chicken-man killed the engine, and stepped out.

"Hey Paul, you got something for me?"

"Nah," Paul said. "Ain't had time yet."

"What are you doing here so dressed up?" The chicken-man walked to the back of his truck. "Give me a hand with this."

Paul joined him, and the chicken-man pulled down the rear guard: Matt was tied up in his tuxedo, duct tape over his mouth. When the chicken-man hopped into the flat-bed, Matt looked wide-eyed at Paul, trembling and shaking his head.

"The fuck is this?" Paul said.

"Nothing," the chicken-man said, and he grabbed Matt by the armpits. "Let him go ..."

The chicken-man kicked Matt out the back to the hard gravel, jumped down. "What's that in your hand?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing," the chicken-man repeated, and he sat Matt up. "Don't look like nothing. Looks like a titty bead to me." He went to the passenger door, returned with a red gasoline can. His tuxedo scuffed and dirt-streaked, Matt murmured into the tape, tears on his cheeks.

"Jesus," Paul said. "Don't."

"Don't what? Where's the two grand I asked for?"

"I didn't—"

"Didn't get it. Yeah, I see that. You think you're James Bond, think you can go at the boss with a fucking titty bead?" The chicken-man uncorked the gas can and dumped it on Matt's head.

"No ..." Paul checked the road. Where were the fucking cars?

The chicken-man tossed away the empty can, and as Matt hunched forward in terrified sobs, dripping with gasoline, the chicken-man said, "I asked you for two. Look at me, Paul. I told him how smart you are, and do you bring me the money? No, you bring a bead." He slapped it out of Paul's hand—the bead disappeared into the woods. "You talk to the virgin again—you take anything from her—and that won't be your jerk-off drinking buddy ..." He indicated gas-drenched Matt. "It'll be Mandy or your Ma, understand?"

"Don't threaten them."

"Or what? You got it all wrong, Paul. I'm a reasonable guy. I don't hurt people."

"Please ..."

"Shut up." The chicken-man snapped his fingers. Matt burst into yellow flame, convulsing.

"Oh Jesus."

The chicken-man snapped again, and tree roots snared Paul's boots. "I only want two," the chicken-man said. "You didn't have time this morning, I understand."

Paul's stomach heaved, and his knees bucked. He wanted to swing

Two nude women slumped in the far corners, duct tape over their eyes, red ball gags in their mouths, their wrists handcuffed to wall chains.

at the chicken-man, but he couldn't move for the roots on his ankles—impossible, but there they were. Paul closed his eyes, smelled cooking hair.

The chicken-man said, "Get in your truck."

The roots released his ankles, and Paul stumbled into the road, as his best friend burned alive. Not armed, Paul thought. The chicken-man ain't—

"Just get in the truck, Paul."

Paul did as he was told, hands heavy on the steering wheel. He couldn't move, couldn't start to think. That's the chicken-man. You don't—the chicken-man knocked on the window, and Paul cranked it down.

"Tonight at six," the chicken-man said. "Sound good?"

"Yeah."

"Drive safe."

Hands shaking—Matt was still burning in the rear view—Paul keyed the ignition, pulled away. When the road was empty behind him, Paul jerked onto the shoulder and fell on his knees to vomit. What's wrong with me? Go back. Go—but he couldn't. He drove north, found a spot in front of Shine's, and when he slapped down the ten dollar entry fee, asked the bouncer for Rose.

At midday, Shine's was empty except for the girl onstage and a few old-timers on stools. They brought Rose out of the back, and when she saw Paul, she paled. "You shouldn't be here."

"The fuck is going on?" Paul said.

The bouncer pushed him. "Watch your mouth."

Rose said, "Buy me a drink." Paul did, and she straightened his hair. "You seen something bad?"

"Why's he care about your beads?"

She pulled her hand back. "Who?"

"Yeah, who," Paul said. "He called you 'the virgin'—the hell were you doing with my Pop?"

"Lower your voice."

"I found one of those beads where my Pop died—he have it with him when he crashed?"

"Maybe," she said.

"Why?"

"I gave it to him. Your dad lost a lot at the tables."

"I know."

"No, you don't. Drink your beer, honey." She touched his hand, and even that—even now—made him hard. "Your Pop was a good man," she said. "Lousy at poker, though."

"What'd my Pop lose? You said—"

"His soul, honey." She sipped her beer. "That enough for you?"

Paul stared at the waves of cigarette smoke in the lights and said, "Don't fuck with me."

"I ain't," she said. "The boss came over from the old country, and yeah, maybe your dad wasn't exactly clean, but a soul's a soul. It's how he's still alive, as old as he is—just like me." Rose smiled. "Honey, we both eat life, each in our own way—it's the bit of him I got from our time together."

"You and the chicken-man—"

"Not the chicken-man—the big guy." She rubbed his arm. "You're a sweetie, ain't you? Little dense, but you're a man like your dad. You shouldn't come here, I took enough of you already."

"What?"

"Think you weighed the same after you left yesterday? I can't help it—it's what happens, what I got from him."

"I don't—"

"I suck your soul, dear."

He fidgeted with the beer bottle. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. So does he, but it ain't the same. They offered me to him in the old country, you understand, back when things were different." She jiggled her bead necklace. "What do you think these are—plastic? We're like that chink diagram, what is it—yin yang? Light and dark; same thing, different shades. He's changed so much, and I—nobody—can reason with him now. You understand?"

"No."

"He's a demon, honey—well, not really, but you get the idea, and his livelihood went south with the rest of this one-horse town. They used to lose miners every other year. Where do you think they went—what do you think he eats?"

Paul stared at her. Made about as much sense as everything else, didn't it?

"Here." She took off her necklace, unhooked the latch and gave him one of the beads. "You lose that, like your Pop did, and ... look, just don't lose it."

"This'll—what, protect me?"

She put her necklace back on, shrugged. "Yeah, maybe. But I'd carry a gun too. You should go, sweetie. You'll need everything you got—I don't want to take more than I have to."

"Why'd he call you 'the virgin'?"

She smiled. "Why do you think?"

IT WAS ALMOST SIX O'CLOCK. AFTER MATT WAS A NO-SHOW AT THE wedding ceremony—the parents were furious, the bride hysterical, but Paul kept his mouth shut—Paul quietly took out the two thousand from his savings in a wad of fifties and twenties. He found a manila envelope in Pop's workroom and stuffed the cash inside.

"I'm fine, Ma," Paul said.

"So who're you seeing?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody is who that's for?" The doorbell rang. "That's him?" Ma said, starting for the door.

"Ma, no—come on," Mandy said, but she couldn't stop her.

Ma opened the door and paled. "Oh."

"Mrs. Schmidt, you feeling well? This is for you." The chicken-man handed her a basket of chocolates. "Best kind you can get 'round here—my wife swears by 'em."

"Thank you," Ma said. "You want to see my son?"

Paul came out, and Ma backed away, saying, "We'll leave you boys alone."

"Thank you, ma'am."

When the front door closed, Paul said, "Was nice—about the chocolates."

"Your mom eat chocolates? Didn't know. Some broads can't eat 'em on account of the sugar or something." The chicken-man nodded. "That for me?" Paul gave him the envelope, and the chicken-man eyed the cash, shut it again. "Told him you were smart, Paul. How much you figure you can afford—a grand a month too much? Won't be easy, but you can keep it up so as the boss is convinced not to add no interest. That's fair, right? That way you keep your savings, your mom keeps the Buick, and in thirteen months, you're clean, back to zero."

Paul looked up from the envelope. He wanted to say that there would be no more payments—even that two grand there was too much, more than he should ever pay. Get off my lawn and drive away, chicken-man, or I call the cops.

"That sound good, Paul?"

"Yeah."

"Thought it would." The chicken-man started back for his truck. "Tell your mom to enjoy those chocolates, all right? I'll see you on the fifteenth."

As the chicken-man climbed in, Paul went back inside. Mandy and Ma got up in the den.

"He gone?" Mandy asked.

Paul nodded, and Ma said, "Everything all right, Paulie? If you're in some kind of trouble, you tell me."

Paul went back to Pop's workroom, grabbed the key ring from its wall hook, and opened the side cabinet.

"Paul." Mandy came over as he grabbed the .45 six-shooter and a box of bullets. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he said and pocketed the bullets. The gun was heavy in his right hand. "Go on."

There were frightened tears in her eyes, but she didn't cry. He kissed her.

"Come on, baby," she murmured. "Please put it back."

"Can't." He jerked away, toward the door. "Won't be long."

He slipped the unloaded pistol into the front of his jeans under his t-shirt, then stopped at the front door. Ma was watching from the den.

"Paul?" she said.

"Yeah Ma, I'll be back soon. Just going out for some air."

"Mandy going with you?"

He opened the door. "Nah, she's tired."

"I love you, boy."

"Love you too, Ma."

He went to his truck, set the gun and bullet box on the passenger seat, and backed out. Down State Road 6, Paul switched off the brights when he passed a state trooper heading up. Without moving his hand from the wheel, the cop waved with two fingers, and Paul waved back. He glanced at the gun and turned onto the curl that took him into town.

Sawyer's Restaurant was lit up, the parking lot full. There was the chicken-man's Chevy, tucked in the center of the lot, between more pickups. When a little Jap car pulled away at the back, Paul took the spot, switched off the engine, but he didn't get out. He rolled the window down and took a breath of clean air, told his pulse to slow. Couples filtered out of Sawyer's laughing or smoking, driving off in red tail lights. He watched people leave for hours, until only the chicken-man's truck remained. Perfect.

Finally, the chicken-man came out, locked up the back exit. His hands suddenly shaking again, Paul jammed bullets into each of the six-shooter's chamber holes. Should have loaded it sooner, he thought. What's wrong with me? One bullet, two. The chicken-man started for his truck, hunched against the late-night chill. Three, four, five. He hadn't noticed Paul. Six bullets. Paul weighed the pistol in his right hand, opened the door, and slammed it—the chicken-man looked up, thirty feet from his own truck, fifty feet from Paul.

"Who's that?" the chicken-man called.

"Just me," Paul said, and he walked fast across the lot.

"Paul? What you got there?"

Paul walked past the pick-up, and now the chicken-man backed up a step, eyes on the .45.

"Paul—"

"Stay right there." Paul stopped out of arm's length, the gun aimed at the chicken-man's face. "Where's the envelope?"

"Money's long-gone, Paul. You're smart, I told him—"

"Nah, I ain't that smart," Paul said. "Where's Matt?"

"Ain't here neither."

"Let's see."

As the chicken-man watched the pistol, Paul could see the traps and switches catching inside his head. "You know what a mistake this is?" the chicken-man said. "Put it down, drive away, and I'll forget this. Just go back to your truck."

Paul gestured to Sawyer's rear exit. "Walk."

"Paul—"

"You want to get shot?" Paul said. "Let's go—move!"

The chicken-man's expression slackened again with that apathetic edge Paul told himself he'd imagined at Shine's. "Been talking to the virgin, huh? Thought you were smarter than that."

"Hands up."

The chicken-man whistled. "Look at you. Watched too many movies, right? It's all about strength, Paul—muscle. Ain't got shit to do with good and evil, no matter what she told you. You don't know your own strength. You're weak."

They went inside, and Paul flipped the wall switch: a closed restaurant-bar with upturned stools and chairs. Somebody'd left a mop near a door marked Private—Employees Only.

"So—what now?" the chicken-man said. "Get that gun out of my face already."

Paul didn't lower the gun. "Let's go in there."

"Ain't nothing—"

Paul walked him to the door. "Open it anyway."

The chicken-man did: they were at the top of a carpeted staircase that dropped between cement walls to a thicker Private door.

"Go on," Paul said.

At the bottom, the chicken-man glanced back, sorting through the key-ring. "Really think your money's down here? Go back, Paul."

No, too late now. "Open it up," Paul said.

The chicken-man watched him. "You sure?"

"What's in there?"

"Not your money."

"Let's see."

The chicken man pressed the door wide, and something rustled in the darkness.

Around another corner, the tunnel opened into a cavern of wooden wall supports and mounds of gold. Wrong turn.

"Hit the light," Paul said.

"Yeah," the chicken-man said, and he clicked a wall switch. Phosphorescent strips buzzed in white hospital light: the office floor was carpeted yellow, the walls and ceiling were bomb shelter cement, there was an elevator on the opposite wall, behind the desk, and there were ceramic lamps on the tables and two on the desk with old newspapers, folders, a typewriter, a leather whip, and . . . Jesus—

"The fuck is this?" Paul said.

Two nude women slumped in the far corners, duct tape over their eyes, red ball gags in their mouths, their wrists handcuffed to wall chains. The women shifted when they heard Paul's voice—the brunette on the left was young with small breasts and bruised legs, the woman on the right was big, her pale body criss-crossed with red stripes and cigarette burns.

"You ..."

"Turn around," the chicken-man said. "Walk out."

There were framed photographs on every wall. The chicken-man posed in all of them, grinning, sometimes in sunglasses, sometimes in sweat-stained muscle shirts. He posed over a ditch of disfigured corpses, over a woman in a bathtub with bloody stumps for hands, over a rack of fly-covered heads.

Straining to keep the pistol steady, Paul said, "Let 'em go."

"Suppose I unlock them ..." The chicken-man led Paul around the desk. "Where they going?"

"Shit."

Neither of the women had feet. Their ankle-stumps were wrapped with tight bandages and tape. The younger girl started to tremble and murmur through her gag.

"It's all right," the chicken-man told her. "Nothing's going to happen." He turned to Paul. "You want to go back now." Not a question.

"Unlock 'em."

The chicken-man knelt over the girl and ran a hand through her hair. "Not good and evil, Paul. Just muscle is all." He clicked a key into her handcuff to open the clamp. The girl's wrists were discolored, swollen.

"Her mouth ..."

The chicken-man untied her ball gag, and when it came out, she yelped—she didn't have any teeth and no tongue.

"Get that tape off her."

As the chicken-man pulled at the edge of her eye-tape, she moaned, but she didn't try to get up. The tape peeled off to expose two scabby holes.

"Happy?" the chicken-man said.

"What did you do...?"

The chicken-man laughed, startled. "You think I did this? Come on, what kind of sick bastard you think I am?"

"Those pictures—"

"Think I'm self-employed?" The chicken-man glanced at the elevator door. "You and I—and them—we live by his fucking grace, understand? He's older than this shit town, than this shit country. There's worse things can happen than death. You thought about your mom, 'bout Mandy?"

That did it.

Paul whipped his pistol across the chicken-man's forehead, and the girl giggled in a hideous curl of bloody gums and eyesockets. Paul lowered the gun to the chicken-man's face.

"Paul, wait ..."

The girl shrieked, startling Paul, and the chicken-man went for the elevator: the doors dinged open, and as Paul raised the pistol, shouted, "Stop screaming!" the elevator closed. The girl quieted. The big woman rattled and fought with her chains, and Paul jabbed the elevator button. The doors opened again: empty. He got in, tapped the lower button marked B, and the doors shut. The room shuddered and dropped. Paul tapped the pistol. The doors opened. A rock-wall mine shaft curled away in the flicker of wall lamps. Go back, Paul told himself. Chicken-man's gone. Leave him. No: I walk away, and he comes for Mandy or Ma like he did with Matt—no. Paul stepped off, the elevator shut behind him. Box speakers were rigged beside the wall lamps—an intercom?

Gun raised, Paul crept down the mine shaft, slowed as he neared a corner, and spun around—nothing. He pivoted around another corner, and as he crept deeper, the air tightened, smelled of smoke. Go back. Paul reached a two-way intersection: left or right. Both paths were lit, no way to know. He went left, and, gun still ready, Paul turned another corner—the chicken-man lunged from the shadows, and Paul jerked the pistol up—"Don't you—"—and blasted a hole in the chicken-man's chest. The .45 bucked hard enough to twist Paul's wrist, and in the acrid smoke, the chicken-man sprawled with the ends of his wet ribs gaping through his shirt. The walls, the floor, Christ, even the ceiling was slick with blood.

Paul caught the rock-wall, arms tingly with adrenaline. That was it—it was over. I shot him. Paul shook his arms to loosen the muscles, told his heart to slow down. The lamps went black, came back on.

"... what is your name? is your name?"

Paul looked. Nobody there, but the lamps sputtered again. The speakers? There were shadows inside the walls. He started back—but what were those ... there were people in the rock. A grim, bearded man, his nude body emaciated, watched from inside the stone, and as Paul ran faster, he passed another man, and now a boy with sad eyes, and an elderly woman with her hands raised, reaching for him. Not real, just get out.

"What is your name? is your name?" the voice echoed again.

Paul slowed, raised the pistol. Shriveled people—a woman frozen in tears; a shrunken man covering his face with both hands; a screaming toddler—surrounded him, just inside the walls, as if the rock were translucent plastic.

"What's your name?" Paul said.

Something laughed in an earthquake-shudder. Matt was locked inside the rock, his features shadowed with famine. The lamps stayed on.

"You will work for me? for me?" the voice said. "His room will be yours, you will collect. collect. You will be paid whatever you ask. you ask."

"I ain't no chicken-man."

"You refuse? refuse?"

Paul took another step, and something shuddered—it jump-started the speakers, and music came on: an electronic beat and a woman's hushed voice: "For your eyes only, can see me through the night ..."

Around another corner, the tunnel opened into a cavern of wooden wall supports and mounds of gold. Wrong turn.

"For your eyes only, I never need to hide ..."

Wads of dollar bills were piled aside mountains of gold coins and geometric gold-bar towers; there were diamond piles; Middle Eastern statues of kings and lions and cat-beasts with human heads, all gold. Paul stared. The music echoed; the lights went out.

"You can see so much in me, so much in me that's new ..." Piano taps: tan! tan!

He turned: flames flared in the tunnel, back-lighting a thick, animal-shape. Paul fired, the pistol kicked, but the monster crept closer.

"I never felt until I looked at youuuuu ..." Crescendo.

The monster lunged in a blur of scales and muscle and meathook claws—Paul blasted into the mass, and it broke him against the wall.

"For your eyes onlyyyyy!"

Somehow, he still had the pistol, smelled sulfur, felt heat-breath on his face, raised the gun.

"Only for youuuuu!"

Flames roiled at both ends of the tunnel, the bonfire-heat sharp on his skin. The pistol flashed at the dragon's belly.

"You see what no one else can see, now I'm breaking free ..."

The dragon huffed smoke from its nostrils, and its metallic eyes shone like angry gems in the firelight.

"For your eyes onlyyyyy!"

Paul fired at its head.

"Only for youuuuu!"

As it came at him again, he fired into its face at point-blank range—the muzzle-flash lit alligator jaws—and it pinned him to the wall, claws deep in his shoulders. Paul's face jammed to the rock: Pop was on the other side.

"The love I know you need in me, there to see you freed in me ..."

Paul wedged the .45 up, pressed to the dragon's scales, and fired—the gun clicked. No—never six fucking shots. No.

The dragon whispered, "Your fear tastes like sugar. sugar ..."

"Only for youuuuu ..."

"Wait. wait," it said. "I know your scent. your scent." Its claws twisted in his shoulders until his vision blotted. "You are the son of my meal, just there. just there." The dragon's lipless jaws curled into a wolf-smile as it eyed Pop.

"Only for youuuuu . . ."

"He did not know the rules, he thought my pet—the virgin I kept in the Cold Times—could protect him. protect him."

A long pause of hushed electronic beats mimicking "For your eyes only ..."

"You are a soft, monkey race. monkey race. Without your tongues and toys, you are cattle. But I do enjoy your pain. pain."

"For your eyes only ..."

Paul shifted against the heavy press. Can't move, and the weight was making it harder to breathe.

"The nights are never cold, you really know me ..."

Continued on page 89

Fox Spirits

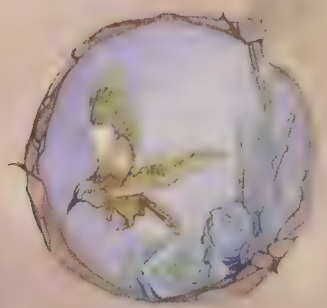
Conversations

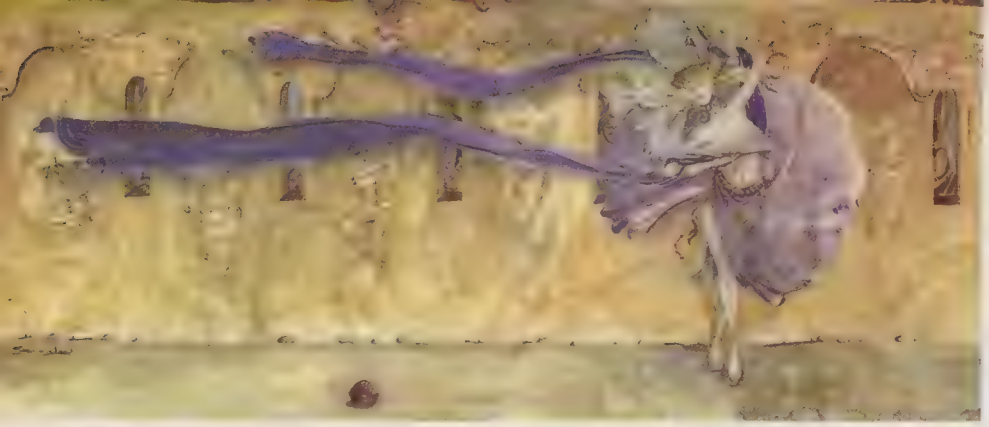
Harbinger

An Abundance of Imagination

STEPHANIE PUI-MUN LAW explores the mythological roots and magical imagery of fantasy in her delicate, detailed watercolors.

By Karen Haber





Sweet Intoxication of the Fall

World Tarot Card

Raccoon Spirits

Some artists enjoy seeing their work in various media: paint, print, digital, to name a few. Not many can enjoy it in the flesh, as Stephanie Pui-Mun Law does. Fans download her unique fantasy images and designs—most of which have appeared on book jackets and RPG cards, among other venues—to have them made a permanent part of themselves as tattoos.

"They often come up to me at conventions and show me their tattoos," says the artist cheerfully. "It's fun to see. I don't play the card games. I don't play the role-playing games. It's the imagery of fantasy that engages me, its mythological roots and magical imagery. And I know that the images can have deep meaning for people—they sometimes send me very revealing letters about their personal reactions to my work." Stephanie admits she hasn't been tempted to get a tattoo, yet. "I couldn't decide which image to choose. There are so many."

A quick glance at Shadowscapes.com (*http://Shadowscapes.com*), her beautiful self-designed website, confirms that the girl has been busy. Check out her e-galleries and you'll see over a dozen separate categories of art including Angels, Faeries, Celtic inspirations, Eastern imagery, Role Playing Game cards, and a Tarot deck that she has nearly finished designing. The viewer can wallow in the varied fruits of the artist's imagination, rendered in watercolor, pencil, pen, or digital work.

Hermit Tarot Card

Stephanie has included several tutorials on her user-friendly site, in part to give back the help that she received early in her career. "I got a lot of help from artists at conventions when I was getting started and I've always been appreciative, so I try to be helpful when I can."

"The best way to learn art is to do it, every single day, just pick up a pen or a brush or a pencil and do it and you'll learn so much more than any art class would ever be able to teach you."

Her own solo how-to book, *Creating Magical Angel, Fairy, and Mermaid Worlds with Watercolor,* will be published by Impact Books later this year.

Stephanie started out with luck: she always knew what she wanted to do. "I was painting and drawing and using pastels from I can't even remember when. I always wanted to be an artist."

Despite being drawn to art and fantasy, she allowed her practical side to lead, and took a double-major at UC Berkeley in Computer Programming and Art.

"I had fun, although Berkeley's art department is focused on modern, nonrepresentational art and was not supportive of my interest in fantasy illustration. In the faculty's opinion, watercolor is just for studies or illustrators—and you could hear the quotation marks on 'illustrators.' To them, digital is not art. They would go crazy if they saw my website and what I'm doing these days."

"At Berkeley I decided to just go for it and fully immerse myself in the art major, to expand my abilities. Just because other people were being judgmental didn't mean I had to be. But if you intend to be an illustrator, an environment like that can be extremely frustrating."

Chessmates

After graduation, a job at Plumtree Software, creating corporate portal software, naturally followed. Stephanie spent several years at her day job, doing art on the side. "I did programming during the day and went home to paint every night. Actually, it's nice to have these programming skills. I can do my own website maintenance, design, and shopping cart."

"My family is very proud and supportive now, although they were a little doubtful at first, especially when I was leaving my programming job," she says, laughing.

Given Stephanie's familiarity with the digital world, you might think she creates most of her delicate pastel-toned work on a computer, but you would be wrong. She works mostly in watercolor, having spent several years working in oils and acrylics. "Using lots of thin layers of glazing led naturally to using watercolor," she says.

"I love the subtle color shifts that can be achieved by layering in watercolor. It's an ethereal effect. And, practically, I like the quick drying time. They're very portable, too."

"I sketch out of my head, and every now and then I take a figure-drawing class to refresh myself. I think it's useful for artists to do that from time to time to keep themselves grounded. And I must say, digital cameras are a marvelous thing for reference."

"I was 18 when I first saw Photoshop. I was madly in love with it for a while. But I began to miss having a final real picture that wasn't just bitmaps on a screen. No matter how high quality you print it, it never has the quality of paint on paper or canvas."

Among her art influences she lists the Pre-Raphaelites, the Impressionists, Renaissance artists, and Modern artists. She also admires Alan Lee's watercolors, for their seeming effort-

Loreley IV

Skimming the Surface

Secret Places 3

lessness. And, she says, please don't forget her Chinese heritage, which informs her work in both overt and subtle ways. (Her Chinese name, Pui-Mun, is included in her chop mark signature on each finished painting.)

She also employs Celtic imagery in her work, especially celtic knotwork, which the fans seem to enjoy, especially for tattoos.

"There's a very balanced flow to it. It looks very confusing, but once you understand how it's built, it's not that bad."

Among her favorite paintings are *Maestro of the Birds* in her Angels series. A joyous work, it's filled with delicate color harmonies, pattern, and movement.

Another favorite, *Chessmates*, from her Faeries series, reveals both the artist's gentle sense of whimsy and mastery of detail. The washy color effects she achieves in the treetops of this work are especially lovely.

Stephanie gives fans a tantalizing peek at her favorite ongoing personal project, paintings for a Tarot deck. "Most of my personal work consists of doing a single image here or there, but I return to the Tarot in between other jobs. I've done about 50 of the cards, so I've still got a way to go. With 78 in the deck, I estimated it would take four years. I began it in 2004 and I think I'll finish it in early 2008."

"In general, it used to be extremely hard to part with my originals, but now I have so much work that I feel that it's better to have

it hanging on somebody's wall. Their enjoying it, loving it, means much more than having it sitting in my closet gathering dust. Personal pieces—I haven't sold one of the Tarot paintings and I may not sell them even after I finish the set and print them. But with the commissioned pieces, especially, it's easier to let them go."

From her website, she sells her originals, prints, and jewelry made from her art and accepts commissions. At the time of this interview, she was putting the finishing touches on her own jewelry website: *http://jewelry.Shadowscapes.com.*

"I don't know what I'd do without the Internet," she says. "With it you can put yourself out there and people will come. It's really enabled me to stay in touch with fans."

"Fantasy art is a niche market, so you can target your audience very easily. I have a well-defined fan base. I'm much luckier than artists working in other genres."

She produces three to six paintings a month and says that a small painting can take a few hours to complete; a book cover, on average, requires a week of work. The size of the works varies. "I've worked from 4 by 4 inches to 20 by 30 inches." She paints on illustration board because she likes the smooth surface.

Sisters Under the Sun

Bridge of Wings—Where She Waits

"I don't have problems with deadlines. I've never been a procrastinator. I'm actually the anti-procrastinator. I've had art directors respond to me with surprise when I submit work early."

Stephanie says that what she most enjoys is being able to create every day. "I love being able to create all the images that I see in my head. In fact, I feel like I'm being useless when people ask, 'What do you do when you're blocked?' I have the opposite problem: I have too many images that I want to create and I don't have the time to do them all."

She enjoys attending conventions and meeting fans. "The fans are wonderful." In 2007 she's planning to attend Baycon & Fanime (San Jose, April), Gencon (Indianapolis, August), and Dragoncon (Atlanta, September).

"I love what I do," she adds. "It took me about three years to get to the point where I could leave my day job and work on my art full time and if it ever became anything like a day job, I wouldn't do it."

No fear of that. Stephanie says that she doesn't have enough hours in each day to paint all the images that abound in her imagination.

"I can't imagine running out of ideas." ❧

Most children dream that one day their royal parents will find them and whisk them back to the castle. But if youre already a princess, what can you dream of?

PRINCESS LUCINDA AND THE HOUND OF THE MOON

BY THEODORA GOSS ★ ILLUSTRATION BY ERIN & KELLY CARTY

When the Queen learned that she could not have a child, she cried for three days. She cried in the clinic in Switzerland, on the shoulder of the doctor, an expert on women's complaints, leaving tear stains on his white coat. She cried on the train through Austria, while the Alps slipped past the window of her compartment, their white peaks covered with snow. She cried when the children from the Primary School met her at the station, bringing her bouquets of snowdrops, the first of the season. And after the French teacher presented her with the bouquets, and the children sang the Sylvanian national anthem, their breaths forming a mist on the cold air—she cried especially then.

"It doesn't matter, Margarethe," said King Karel. "My nephew Radomir will make a fine king. Look at how well he's doing at the Primary School. Look at how much he likes building bridges, and if any country needs bridges, it's Sylvania." For the Danube and its tributaries ran through the country, so that wherever you went in Sylvania was over a river, or perhaps two.

And then Queen Margarethe stopped crying, because it was time to greet the French ambassador, and she was after all the youngest daughter of the King of Greece. She had been trained to restrain her emotions, at least at state functions. And the blue satin of her dress would stain.

But that night, when the French ambassador was discussing business with the bankers of Sylvania, and her other guests were discussing French innovations in art (for although Sylvania was a small country, it had a fashionable court) or losing at cards in a cloud of cigarette smoke, the Queen walked out to the terrace.

It was a cold night, and she pulled the blue satin wrap more closely about her shoulders. The full moon above her was wearing a wrap of gray clouds. In its light, she walked down the steps of the terrace, between the topiaries designed by Radomir IV, boxwood swans swimming in a pool of grass, a boxwood stag running from overgrown boxwood hounds. She shivered because her wrap was not particularly warm, but walked on through the rose garden, which was a tangle of canes. She did not want to go back to the castle, or face her guests.

She reached the croquet lawn, beyond which began the forest that surrounded Karelstad, where croquet balls were routinely lost during tournaments between the ministers and the ladies-in-waiting. Suddenly, she heard laughter. She looked around, frightened, and said, "Is anyone there?"

No one answered. But under a chestnut tree that would be covered with white flowers in spring, she saw a basket. She knelt beside it, although the frost on the grass would stain her dress more certainly than tears, and saw a child. It was so young that the laugh she had heard might have been its first, and it waved its fist, either at the moon above or at the Queen, whose face looked like a second moon in the darkness.

She lifted the child from its basket. Surely it must be cold, left out on a night like this, when winter still covered Sylvania. Surely whoever had left it here did not deserve a child. She picked it up, with the blanket it was wrapped in, and carried it over the croquet lawn, through the rose garden, between the boxwood swans and the boxwood stag, up the terrace steps, to the castle.

"Surely she has a mother," said the King. "I know this has been difficult for you, Margarethe, but we can't just keep her."

"If you could send the Chamberlain out for diapers," said the Queen. "And tell Countess Agata to warm a bottle."

"We'll have to advertise in the *Karelstad Gazette*. And when her mother replies, we'll have to return her."

"Look," said the Queen, holding the child up to the window, for the cook had scattered cake crumbs on the terrace, and pigeons were battling over them. "Look, embroidered on the corner of her blanket. It must be her name: Lucinda."

No one answered the advertisement, although it ran for four weeks, with a description of the child and where she had been found. And when the King himself went to look beneath the chestnut tree, even the basket was gone.

PRINCESS LUCINDA WAS AN ORDINARY CHILD. SHE LIKED TO READ books, not the sort that princesses were supposed to like, but books about airplanes, and mountain climbing, and birds. She liked to play with her dolls, so long as she could make parachutes for them and toss them down from the branches of the chestnut tree. The Queen was afraid that someday Lucinda would fall, but she could not stop her from climbing trees, or putting breadcrumbs on her windowsill for the pigeons, or dropping various objects, including the King's scepter, out of the palace window, to see if they would fly.

Lucinda also liked the gardener's daughter, Bertila, who could climb trees, although not so well as the Princess. She did not like receptions, or formal dresses, or narrow shoes, and she particularly disliked Jaromila, her lady-in-waiting and Countess Agata's daughter.

But there were two unusual things about Princess Lucinda. Although her hair was brown, it had a silver sheen, and in summer it became so pale that it seemed purely silver. And the Princess walked in her sleep. When the doctor noticed that it happened only on moonlit nights, the Queen ordered shutters to be placed on Lucinda's windows, and moonlight was never allowed into her room.

For the Princess's sixteenth birthday, the Queen planned a party. Of course she did not know when the Princess had been born, so she chose a day in summer, when the roses would be at their best and her guests could smoke on the terrace.

Everyone of importance in Sylvania was invited, from the Prime Minister to the French teacher at the Primary School. (Education was considered important in Sylvania, and King Karel had said on several occasions that education would determine Sylvania's success in the new century.) The Queen hired an orchestra that had been the fashion that winter in Prague, although she confessed to the Chamberlain that she could not understand modern music. And Prince Radomir came home from Oxford.

"They ought to be engaged," said the Queen at breakfast. "Look at what an attractive couple they make, and what good friends they are already." Princess Lucinda and Prince Radomir were walking below the morning room windows, along the terrace. The Queen might have been less optimistic if she had known that they were discussing airplane engines. "And then she would be Queen."

She looked steadily at the King, and raised her eyebrows.

"But I can't help it, Margarethe," said King Karel, moving his scrambled eggs nervously around on his plate with a fork. "When the first King Karel was crowned by the Pope himself, he decreed that the throne must always pass to a male heir."

"Then it's about time that women got the vote," said the Queen, and drank her coffee. Which was usually how she left it. King Karel imagined suffragettes crashing through the castle windows and writing "Votes for Women" on the portraits of Radomir IV and his queen, Olga.

"How can you not like him?" asked Bertila later, as she and Lucinda sat on the grass, beneath the chestnut tree.

"I am the Hound of the Moon. If you don't bring me the Princess Lucinda, I will bite the head off the statue of King Karel in front of the cathedral, and the steeple off the cathedral itself, and the turrets off the castle."

"Oh, I like him well enough," said Lucinda. "But I don't want to marry him. And I'd make a terrible queen. You should have seen me yesterday, during all those speeches. My shoes were hurting so badly that I kept shifting from foot to foot, and Mother kept raising her eyebrows at me. You don't know how frightening it is, when she raises her eyebrows. It makes me feel like going to live in the dungeon. But I don't want to stand for hours shaking hands with ambassadors, or listen to speeches, even if they are in my honor. I want—"

What did she want? That was the problem, really. She did not know.

"But he's so handsome, with those long eyelashes, and you know he's smart." Bertila lay back on the grass and stared at the chestnut leaves.

"Then you should marry him yourself. Honestly, I don't know what's gotten into you lately. You used to be so sensible, and now you're worse than Jaromila."

"Beast. As though a prince could marry a gardener's daughter." Bertila threw a chestnut, rejected by a squirrel the previous autumn because a worm had eaten through its center, at the Princess.

"Ouch. Stop it, or I'll start throwing them back at you. And not only do I have more chestnuts, I have much better aim. But seriously, Bertie, you'd make a better queen than I would. You're so beautifully patient and polite. And since you're already in love with his eyelashes ..."

"There you are," said Jaromila. "Lying in the dirt as usual, and talking with servants." She tapped one shoe, as pointed and uncomfortable as fashion demanded, on the grass.

"You're not wanted here," said Lucinda.

"But you're wanted at the reception, half an hour ago."

"You see?" said Lucinda to Bertila, in dismay. "You'd make a much better queen than I would!"

"And she'd be just as entitled to it," said Jaromila. She had also seen Lucinda walking with Radomir on the terrace, but she had reacted quite differently than the Queen. She could not tell you the length of Radomir's eyelashes, but she knew that one day he would be king.

"What do you mean?" asked Lucinda.

"Yes, what do you mean?" asked Bertila. She was usually patient, just as Lucinda had said, but today she would have liked to pull Jaromila's hair.

"Well, it's time someone told you," said Jaromila, shifting her feet, because it was difficult to stand on the grass, and because she was nervous. "But you can't tell anyone it was me." From the day the Princess had been found, Queen Margarethe had implied that Lucinda was her own child, born in Switzerland. No one at court had dared to question the Queen, and the Chamberlain and Countess Agata liked their positions too well to contradict her. But Jaromila had heard them discussing it one night, over glasses of sherry. If anyone found out that Jaromila had told the Princess, she would be sent to her grandmother's house in Dobromir, which had no electric lights or telephone, not even a phonograph.

"Told what?" asked Lucinda. "You'd better tell me quickly. I have a whole pile of chestnuts, and you can't run in those shoes."

"That you're not a princess at all. You were found in a basket under this chestnut tree, like a peasant's child."

That afternoon, the Queen had to tell Lucinda three times not to fidget in front of the French ambassador.

As soon as the reception was over, Lucinda ran up to her room and lay on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. Who was she, if she was not the Princess Lucinda? After a while, she got up and took off the dress she had worn to the reception, which had been itching all afternoon. She put on her pajamas. But she could not sleep. For the first time in her life, she opened the shutters on her bedroom windows and looked out. There was the moon, as full as a silver Kroner, casting the shadows of boxwood swans and hounds on the lawn.

In her slippers, she crept down the stairs and out the French doors to the terrace. She walked between the topiaries and the rose bushes, over the croquet lawn, to edge of the forest. There, she lay on the grass and stared up at the moon, through the branches of the chestnut tree. "Who am I?" she asked. It seemed to smile at her, but gave no answer.

LUCINDA WOKE SHIVERING, WITH DEW ON HER PAJAMAS. SHE HAD to sneak back into the castle without being seen by the footmen, who were already preparing for the party.

Jaromila had forgotten to set out the dress she was supposed to wear, a white dress the Queen had chosen, with a train she would probably trip over on the stairs. With a sigh, Lucinda opened the door of her dressing room and started looking through the dresses that hung there, all the dresses she had worn since her christening, for although Lucinda did not care about dresses, Queen Margarethe cared a great deal.

That was why she missed the excitement.

Jaromila had been afraid to go to the Princess's room that morning. Lucinda would certainly tell the Queen what she had said, and when the Queen found out—Jaromila remembered Dobromir. So she stayed in the ballroom, where Queen Margarethe was preparing for the party by changing her mind several times about who should sit where. Countess Agata was writing place cards, and the footmen were setting out the glasses for champagne.

King Karel, still in his slippers, wandered into the ballroom and said, "Margarethe, have you seen my crown? I thought I left it next to my bureau—"

That was when the shaking started. The ballroom shook as though the earth were opening beneath it. Jaromila, who was standing by the French doors, clutched at the curtains to stay upright. The Queen fell on Countess Agata's lap, which made a relatively comfortable cushion. The King, less fortunate, stumbled into the footmen, who toppled like dominoes. Most of the champagne glasses crashed to the floor.

A voice resounded through the ballroom. "Bring me the Princess Lucinda!"

The King, recovering his breath, said, "Whatever was that?"

Prince Radomir ran into the room and said, "Was it an earthquake?"

One of the footmen, who had fallen by the French doors, said, "By Saint Benedek, that's the biggest dog I've ever seen."

The King went to the French doors, leaving Prince Radomir to pick up the Queen and the Countess. There, on the terrace, stood a hound, as white as milk and as large as a pony.

"Bring me the Princess Lucinda!" he said again, in a voice like thunder. Then he shook himself, and the ballroom shook with him, so the King had to hold on to a curtain, like Jaromila, to stay upright. The remaining champagne glasses crashed to the floor, and the footmen fell down again in a heap.

Nothing in King Karel's training had prepared him for an enormous hound on his terrace, a hound who evidently had the ability to shake his castle to its foundations (his training having focused on international diplomacy and the Viennese waltz). But he was a practical man. So he said, from behind the curtain, "Who are you, and what do you want with the Princess?"

"I am the Hound of the Moon. If you don't bring me the Princess Lucinda, I will bite the head off the statue of King Karel in front of the cathedral, and the steeple off the cathedral itself, and the turrets off the castle. And if I'm still hungry, I'll bite the roofs off all the houses in Karelstad—"

"Here she is, here is the Princess Lucinda!" said the Queen, pushing Jaromila out the French doors. Jaromila, surprised and frightened, screamed. The Countess, who has leaning on Radomir, also screamed and fainted.

But the hound grabbed Jaromila by the sash around her waist, leaped from the terrace and landed among the topiaries, then leaped through the rose garden and over the forest, into the clouds.

Lucinda never noticed. When the castle had shaken, all the dresses on the shelves of the dressing room had fallen on top of her, along

with most of the shoes, and when she had crawled out from beneath them, she imagined that she had somehow shaken them down herself. And still the dress for the ball was nowhere to be found.

THE HOUND DROPPED JAROMILA ON THE FLOOR OF A CAVE WHOSE walls were covered with crystals.

The first thing she said when she had regained her breath was, "I'm not the Princess Lucinda."

"We shall see," said the hound. "Get up, whoever you are, and take a seat."

At the center of the cave, arranged around a table, Jaromila saw three chairs. The first was an obvious example of Opulentism, which had been introduced at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Its arms were carved to resemble griffins, with garnets for eyes, and it was elaborately gilded. The second was a chair any Sylvanian farmer could have carved on a winter night as he sat by his fireside. The third was simply a stool of white wood.

Surely he didn't expect her to sit on that. And as for the second chair, she wasn't a peasant. Jaromila sat in the first chair, on its cushion of crimson velvet, and put her arms on the griffins.

"Can I offer you something to drink?" asked the hound.

On the table, she saw three cups. The first was certainly gold, and probably Lalique. The others were unimportant, a silver cup like those common in Dobromir, which had a silver mine, and a cup of horn that a shepherd might have drunk from. Of course she would drink from the first. She took a careful sip. The wine it contained, as red as the griffins' eyes, gave her courage.

"I'm not the Princess Lucinda. You will take me home at once!"

"As you wish," said the hound. "But the journey might be cold. Can I offer you a coat?"

In his mouth he held three coats. The first was a crimson brocade embroidered with gold thread, which she had seen just that week in a catalog from Worth's. That was the coat she would wear, not the plain green wool, or the dingy white thing that the hound must have drooled on.

But as soon as she reached to take it, the hound opened his mouth, dropped the coats, and once again grabbed her sash. And then they were off, over the forests of Sylvania, over Karelstad and the croquet lawn, to the castle terrace.

The King was still trying to soothe the Queen, who was crying, "What have I done?" Prince Radomir was waving smelling salts under the Countess's nose. The footmen were trying to sweep up the shattered glasses.

Upstairs, Lucinda had finally found her dress. It was in the Queen's own dressing room, behind an ermine cape. She sighed with relief. Now at last she could go to the party.

Just as the hound landed, Jaromila's sash ripped, and she dropped to the terrace.

"Bring me the Princess Lucinda!" said the hound. "If you don't bring me the Princess, I will drink up the fountain in front of King Karel's statue, and the pond by the Secondary School that the children skate on, and the river Morek, whose waters run through all the faucets of Karelstad. And if I'm still thirsty, I'll drink up the Danube itself—"

"I am the Princess Lucinda," said a voice from the garden. Bertila walked up the terrace steps. She had woken early to see the preparations for the party, and had been watching all this time from behind the topiary stag.

"Isn't that the gardener's daughter?" asked Prince Radomir. But at that moment the Queen screamed (it seemed her turn), and nobody heard him.

Under ordinary circumstances, no one would have mistaken Bertila for a princess. Her dresses were often patched, and because her mother had died when she was born, she sewed on the patches herself, so they were usually crooked. But today all the servants not needed for the party had been given a holiday, and she was wearing an old dress of Lucinda's. Lucinda had been allowed to give it away because it had torn on a tree branch. Bertila had mended it (with the wrong color thread), but the rip was toward the back, so she hoped it would not be noticed.

"Climb on my back then," said the hound, and climb she did. She twisted her fingers into the hair at his neck, and held on as well as she could when he leaped from the terrace over the forests of Sylvania.

"Mama!" cried Jaromila, at which the Countess revived. But the Queen went into hysterics. And that was when Lucinda finally came down the stairs, holding her train, and stared about her, at the footmen sweeping the floor and the sobbing Queen.

"What in the world is going on?" she asked. King Karel tried to tell her, as did the Queen in broken sobs, and even the Countess, who clutched Prince Radomir's arm so hard that he could not answer. Jaromila tried to powder her nose in the mirror, because after all Prince Radomir was present.

"Radomir?" said Lucinda. And then Radomir explained about the hound and Bertila's deception.

"Well," said Lucinda, when the explanation was over. She turned to the King and Queen. "I think it's time you told me everything."

BERTILA LOOKED ABOUT THE CAVE.

"Will you take a seat?" asked the hound.

"Thank you," said Bertila. Which chair should she choose? Or rather, which chair would Lucinda choose, since she must convince the hound? She had read Lucinda's copy of the Brothers Grimm, which Lucinda had left on the croquet lawn. This was surely a test. Her hands were shaking, and she could scarcely believe that she had spoken in the garden. But here she was, and the deception must continue. Whatever danger Lucinda was in, she must try to save her friend.

Surely Lucinda would never choose a chair so gaudy as the gold one. And a stool did not seem appropriate for a princess. But the wooden chair looked like the one her father had carved for her mother. Lucinda had sat in it often, when she came to the gardener's cottage. The wood had been sanded smooth by a careful hand, and ivy leaves had been painted over the arms and back. That was a chair fit for a princess of Sylvania. She sat down.

"Would you care for something to drink?" asked the hound.

"Thank you," said Bertila. "I really am thirsty."

Lucinda would make fun of the gold cup, and the cup of white horn was like the stool, too plain. But the silver cup, with the snowdrops in enamel, might have been made by the silversmiths of Dobromir, who were the finest in Sylvania. It was a cup fit for the Pope himself. She paused before taking a sip, but surely the hound would not hurt her. He had treated her well so far. The cup was filled with a delicate cider, which smelled like peaches.

"Thank you," she said. "And now I think I'm ready." Although she did not know what she was ready for.

"Very well," said the hound. "You must choose a coat for the journey."

Lucinda would never wear the crimson brocade. But the coat of green wool, with its silver buttons and tasseled hood, looked warm and regal enough for a princess. There was another coat beneath, but it looked tattered and worn.

"I'll wear this one," said Bertila.

"You're not the Princess Lucinda," said the hound.

Bertila stood silently, twisting the coat in her hands. "No," she said finally. "I'm sorry. I hope you don't blame me."

"It was brave of you," said the hound. "But you must return to the castle."

WHEN HE LANDED ON THE TERRACE WITH BERTILA, LUCINDA was waiting.

"You don't have to threaten anyone this time, or break any glasses," she said. "I'm Princess Lucinda, and I'm ready to go with you."

The Queen was sent to bed with a dose of laudanum. The King

cancelled the invitations for the party. Countess Agata had a lunch of poached eggs with the Chamberlain and asked what the monarchy was coming to. Jaromila tried to find Prince Radomir. But he was sitting under the chestnut tree with Bertila, asking if she was all right, and if she was sure. Bertila was blushing and admiring his eyelashes.

"Will you take a seat?" asked the hound.

"What a strange stool," said Lucinda. She had never read the Brothers Grimm, although Bertila had handed her the book with a reproachful glance. "The wood seems to glow. I wonder where it comes from?"

"From the mountains of the moon," said the hound. "Down the slopes of those mountains flow rivers, and on the banks of those rivers grow willow trees, with leaves as white as paper. When the wind blows, they whisper secrets about what is past and what is to come. This stool is made from the wood of those willow trees."

"This is where I'll sit," said Lucinda.

"Can I offer you something to drink?" asked the hound.

"What a curious cup," said Lucinda, picking up the cup of horn. "It's so delicate that the light shines right through it."

"On the slopes of the mountains of the moon," said the hound, "wander herds of sheep, whose wool is as soft and white as thistledown. This cup is carved from the horn of a ram who roamed those mountains for a hundred years."

Lucinda drank from the cup. The water in it was cold, and tasted of snow.

"And now," said the hound, "you must choose a coat for our journey."

"Where are we going?" asked Lucinda. "Oh, how lovely!" She held up a coat that had been lying beneath the coats of crimson brocade and green wool. "Why, it's covered with feathers!"

"The rivers of the moon flow into lakes," said the hound, "and on those lakes live flocks of herons. They build their nests beneath the willow branches, and line them with feathers. There, they lay their eggs and raise their children through the summer. When winter comes, they return to Africa, leaving their nests behind. This coat is made from the feathers of those herons. As for your question, Princess—to meet your mother."

"My mother?" said Lucinda, sitting abruptly back down on the stool. "Oh, I don't know. I mean, until yesterday I thought Queen Margarethe—What is my mother like? Do you think she'll like me?"

The hound seemed to smile, or at least showed his teeth. "She's my mother also. I'm your brother, Lucinda, although we have different fathers. Mine was Sirius, the Dog Star. Yours was a science teacher at the Secondary School."

"And my mother—our mother?" asked Lucinda.

"Our mother is the Moon, and she's the one who sent me for you. Put on your coat, Lucinda. Its feathers will warm you in the darkness we must pass through. Now climb on my back. Mother is eager to see you, and we have waited long enough."

As though in a dream, for nothing in her life, not even the books on airplanes and mountain climbing, had prepared her for such an event, Lucinda put on the coat of white feathers and climbed on the back of the hound. He leaped to the edge of the cave, and then into the sky itself. She was surrounded at first by clouds, and then by stars. All the stars were visible to her, and the Pleiades waved to her as she flew past, calling out, "She's been waiting for you, Lucinda!" Sirius barked and wagged his tail, and the hound barked back. Then they were landing in a valley covered with grass as white as a handkerchief, by a lake whose waters shone like silver.

"Lucinda! Is that really you?"

The woman standing by the side of the lake had silver hair so long that it swept the grasses at her feet, but her face looked not much older than Lucinda's. She seemed at once very young and very old, and at the moment very anxious.

"It is," said the hound. "Go on," he said to Lucinda, nudging her with his nose. "Don't you want to meet her?"

Lucinda walked forward, awkwardly. "It's nice to meet you ..."

"Oh, my dear," said the Moon, laughing and taking Lucinda in her arms, "I'm so happy to have found you at last!"

THE MOON LIVED IN A STONE HOUSE SURROUNDED BY A GARDEN OF white roses. A white cat sat on the windowsill, watching Lucinda with eyes like silver Kroners.

"The soup will be ready in a moment," said the Moon. "I find that the journey between the earth and my home always makes me hungry."

"Do you travel to the earth?" asked Lucinda.

The Moon laughed again. Her laughter sounded like a silver bell, clear and sweet. "You would not have been born, otherwise! In a shed at the back of the house live my bats. Whenever I want to travel to the earth, I harness them and they pull me through the darkness. Perhaps later you'll help me feed them. They like the nectar of my roses. Here, blow on this if you think it's too hot."

She put a bowl of soup in front of Lucinda. It was the color of milk but smelled like chicken, and Lucinda suddenly realized that she had forgotten to eat breakfast.

"Tell me about that," said Lucinda. "I mean, how I was born. If you don't mind," she added. There was so much she wanted to know. How did one ask a mother one had just met?

"Well," said the Moon, sitting down at the table and clasping her hands. "Your father's name was Havel Kronborg. When he was a child, he would lie at night in his father's fields, in Dobromir, and look at the stars. But even then, I think, he loved me better than any of them. How glad I was when he received a scholarship to study astronomy in Berlin! And how proud when his first paper was published in a scientific journal. It was about me, of course, about my mountains and lakes. But when his father died, the farm had to be sold to pay the mortgage, so he worked as a science teacher at the Secondary School. Each night he wandered on the slopes of the mountains about Karelstad, observing the stars. And one night, I met him in the forest.

"How well I remember those months. I could only visit him when the moon was dark—even for love, I could not neglect my work. But each month that we met, our child—that was you, Lucinda—was closer to being born, and his book, *Observations on the Topography of the Moon,* closer to being completed.

Lucinda learned to feed the bats, gathering white roses from the garden, tying them together in bundles, and hanging them upside down from the rafters where the bats slept through the night, while the moon was shining.

"When you were born, I wrapped you in a blanket I had woven from the wool of my sheep, and laid you in a basket of willow branches. Your brother slept beside you and guarded you, and all the stars sang you lullabies."

"Was it this blanket?" asked Lucinda. Out of her pocket she pulled a blanket as fine as silk, which the King had given her in the course of his explanation. Her name was embroidered on one corner. She had been carrying it with her since, but had almost forgotten it. How far away Karelstad seemed, and the Queen, and her life as a princess.

The Moon reached out to touch it, and her eyes filled with silver tears. "Your father asked me to leave you with him for a month. How could I refuse? But I told him to set you in the moonlight every night, so I could see you. One night, while he was gathering mushrooms in the forest for a botany lesson, he placed your basket beneath a tree. I watched you lying there, laughing up at me. But suddenly a cloud came between us, and when it had passed, you were gone.

"You can't imagine his grief. He searched all that night through the forest around the castle. When the gardener found him in the morning, he was coughing, and could not speak. The doctor told him he had caught pneumonia. He died a week later. I found the basket by his bedside. It's the only thing I've had of yours, all these years."

Silver tears trickled down her cheeks. She wiped them away with the blanket.

Lucinda reached out her hand, not knowing what to say. The Moon took it in her own, and smiled through her tears. "But now we've found each other. How like him you look, so practical and solemn. I searched the world for years, but never saw you until last night, lying beneath the tree where he had left you. I knew who you were at once, although you've grown so tall. Will you walk with me, Lucinda? I want to show you the country where you were born."

THE STRANGEST THING ABOUT BEING ON THE MOON WAS HOW familiar it seemed. Lucinda learned to feed the bats, gathering white roses from the garden, tying them together in bundles, and hanging them upside down from the rafters where the bats slept through the night, while the moon was shining. She learned to call the sheep that roamed the mountains, and to comb their fleece. The Moon spun the long hairs caught in the comb on a spinning wheel that sang as it whirled. She learned to gather branches from the willow trees and weave them into baskets, like the one the Moon had shown her, saying, "This is where you slept, as a child."

Sometimes, after the night's work was done, she would sit with the Moon beside the lake, watching the herons teach their children to fly. They would talk about Lucinda's childhood in Karelstad, or the Moon's childhood, long ago, and the things she had seen, when elephants roamed through Sylvania, and the Romans built their roads through its forests, and Morek drove out the Romans, claiming its fertile valleys for his tribe, and Karel I raised an army of farmers and merchants, and drove out the Turks. Then they would lie on the grass and look at the stars dancing above them.

"Their dances were ancient before I was born," said the Moon. "Look at Alcyone! She always wears diamonds in her hair. And Sirius capering among them. We were in love, when I was young. But we each had our work to do, and it could not last. Ah, here is your brother."

The white hound lay next to Lucinda. She put her arm around him, and the three of them watched the stars in their ancient dances.

One day, the Moon showed Lucinda her observatory, on a slope above the lake. "This is where I watch what happens on the earth," she said.

Lucinda put her eye to the telescope. "I can see the castle at Karelstad."

"That was where I last looked," said the Moon. "Since you've been here, I've had no wish to look at the earth. It reminds me of the years before I found you."

"There's Bertila, walking in the garden with Radomir. I can see Jaromila. She's looking in her mirror. And King Karel is talking to the French ambassador. Why do they look so sad? Well, except Jaromila. And there's the Queen. Why, she seems to be crying. And I've never seen her wearing a black dress. Oh!" said Lucinda. "Is it me? Do they think I'm dead?"

The Moon looked at her sadly.

"I'm so sorry," said Lucinda. "It's just—I grew up with them all. And Queen Margarethe was my mother. I mean, I thought she was."

"She was, my dear," said the Moon. "She was the best mother she could be, and so I forgive her, although she has caused me much grief. I knew that eventually you'd want to return to the earth. It's where your father belonged, and you belong there also. But you will come to visit me, won't you?"

"Of course I will, Mother," said Lucinda.

THAT NIGHT, WHILE THE MOON WAS SHINING, THEY HARNESSED THE bats. Lucinda put on her coat of heron feathers, and took the reins.

"Before you go," said the Moon, "I have something to give you. This is the book your father wrote. I've kept it for many years, but I would like you to have it. After all, I have my memories of him." For a moment, she held Lucinda, then said to the bats, "Fly swiftly!"

The bats lifted Lucinda above the white roses in the garden, and above the stone house. The Moon called, "Goodbye, my dear," and then she was flying over the mountains of the moon and toward the earth, which lay wrapped in darkness.

She landed on the castle terrace, just as the sun was rising over the forest around Karelstad. Lucinda released the reins, then ran into the castle and up the stairs, to the Queen's bedroom.

Queen Margarethe was sitting by the window. She had not slept all night, and her eyes were red with weeping. She thought she must be dreaming when she saw Lucinda enter the room and say, "Good morning, Mother."

LUCINDA'S SIXTEENTH BIRTHDAY PARTY TOOK PLACE A MONTH LATE, but was perhaps all the merrier. The orchestra from Prague played, the champagne flowed freely, and the footmen danced with each other in the hall. Under a glittering chandelier, the French ambassador asked Jaromila to marry him, and on the terrace, beneath a full moon, Radomir asked Bertila the same question.

When Lucinda went to her room that night, her head spinning from champagne and her feet aching from the narrow shoes, she found a white stool on which sat a white cup. In the cup was a silver necklace. From it hung a moonstone, which glowed like the moon itself, and next to the cup was a card on which was written, in silver ink, "Happy Birthday, my dear."

The next morning, Lucinda went to the graveyard behind the cathedral. There, by the grave of a forgotten science teacher, she laid a bouquet of white roses.

Observations on the Topography of the Moon received an enthusiastic reception among astronomers in London, Paris, and New York, and was widely quoted in the scientific journals. It was eventually included in the Secondary School curriculum, and the author's portrait appeared on the two Zlata stamp.

After her husband's death, Jaromila opened a couture house in Paris and became famous as the inventor of the stiletto heel. When Radomir finished his degree in engineering, King Karel retired. He and Queen Margarethe lived to a contented old age in the country. King Radomir and Queen Bertila guided Sylvania through two world wars. Karelstad eventually became a center of international banking, where even the streets were said to be paved with Kroners. They sat together, listening to the radio, on the night Lucinda won the Nobel prize for her theories on astrophysics.

But no one, except the white hound that was occasionally seen wandering around the garden of her house in Dobromir, ever found out that she had been the first person on the moon.❧

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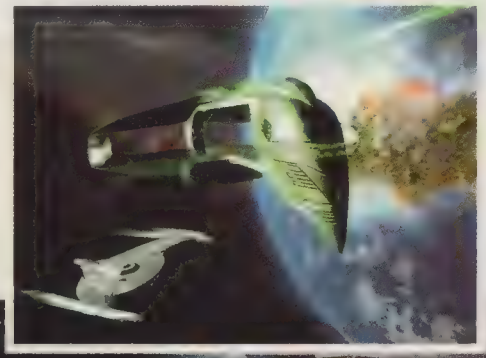
By Eric T. Baker

Take a virtual ride through the 40-year history of *Star Trek* in *Star Trek Legacy.*

RIGHT: Captain America and the other Marvel superheroes take on the Red Dynamo and Fin Fan Foom in Marvel Ultimate Alliance.

It has been 40 years since *Star Trek* first aired, and people have been making *ST* computer games for almost as long. Some of the first games ever committed to punch cards were simple starship combat sims based on the *ST* universe. Computers have come a long way since 1967 and so have the games that model starship combat. The latest one to be licensed and officially set in the ST franchise is ***Star Trek Legacy*** from Bethesda Softworks for the PC and Xbox 360.



The hook for *STL* is that its story, created by D.C. Fontana, spans the time periods of all five *ST* shows and that all five of the actors who played the captains of the ships contributed their voices to the game. The villain is a Vulcan scientist who is young enough when she encounters the first *Enterprise* and Captain Archer that her natural lifespan allows her to still be around to trade soliloquies with Captain Janeway at the game's climax. To add to the danger and tension, the Borg are also on hand.

Despite the story and the high-profile voice actors, *STV* is not a roleplaying game. It is purely a ship to ship combat game. There are no humanoids, animated or filmed, anywhere in the game, but there are 80 ships from four different races, each of them playable either in the single-player story mode or in the online multiplayer modes. And it is good ship to ship combat. For one thing, it is 3-D, but at the same time it is not dog fighting. The ships look and react and (mostly) move like capital ships of the line, not like fighter aircraft.

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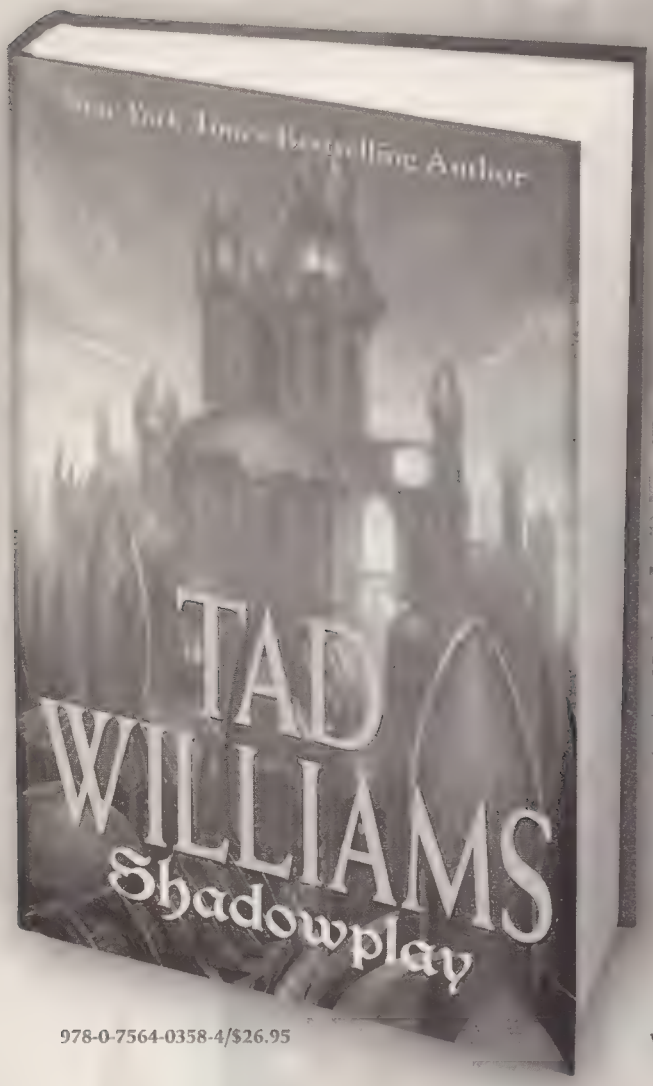

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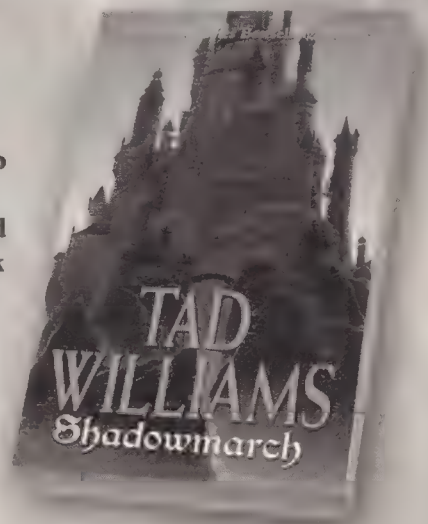

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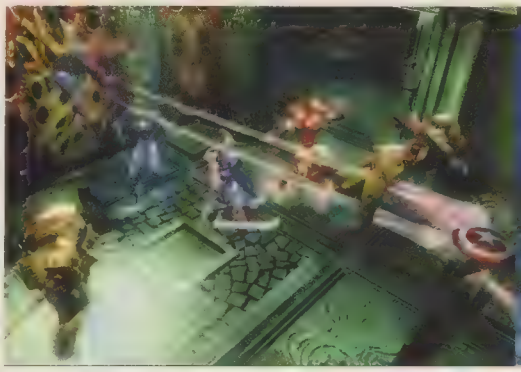
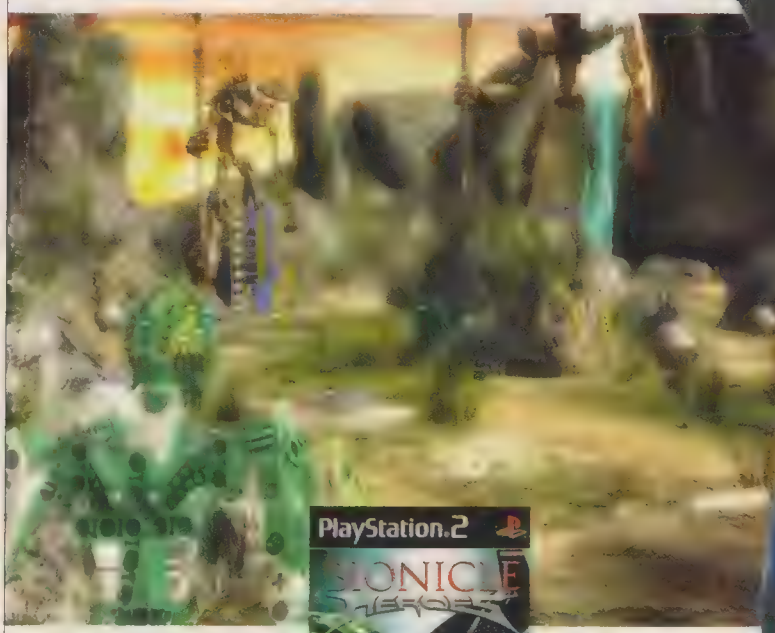


The controls are easier to pick up in the 360 version of *STV*, but in both versions the player can control up to four ships at once without trouble. At the tactical level. the player actively flies one of the ships while issuing follow and fire orders to the others; in the strategic mode, the player directs the ships around the map of the scenario. The game is at its most challenging at the strategic level, and it would have been very nice if the game allowed for saving in the middle of scenarios. Still, the ships look great and the combat is both engrossing and startling. And it is a lot of fun to take a virtual ride through 40 years of *Trek*.



Speaking of franchises with a long history, Activision's punch 'em up RPG for the Xbox, Xbox 360, PS2, and PC makes use of pretty much the whole catalog of Marvel Comic's superheroes and villains. Called ***Marvel Ultimate Alliance,*** the game is very accurately named. After all, before the end of the second chapter the player can have Spider-Man, Ms. Marvel, Moon Knight, and Luke Cage facing off against Fin Fang Foom, but only after battling past the Red Dynamo to get to him.

Overall, there are 18 playable heroes more or less from the start of the game, and seven more that can be unlocked. There are so many villains that the player will lose count. Each hero has multiple, unlockable costumes. Each hero has two basic attacks, some combo moves, and then a variety of powers and buffs. The powers and buffs can be bought up as the heroes level. Depending on the difficulty, the game can be a button-mashing slugfest, or a game where having the right heroes and the right powers to face a particular challenge makes all the difference. There are four heroes on the screen at any given time, and the players can switch which one they are controlling on the fly. Also on the fly, up to three more people can join in, either in person or over the Internet.

With so many playable characters, a legitimate worry is how to level them all up equally? It turns out that while the characters that are actually being controlled by the player gain experience fastest, all the heroes earn experience even if they are kept in reserve. In practice. this means that the less used characters are usually about a level behind their more relied upon brethren. Until players unlock the highest difficulty by completing the game once, this level inequity won't really make much difference. *MUA* is not perfect, but the variety of heroes and villains and settings plus the number of levels make it a game that keeps players involved all the way through, and even has a lot of replay value. Players don't have to be fans of the comic books to love this game.

In format, ***Ar Tonelicon Melody of Elemia*** for the PS2 from NIS America is not very different from a lot of other Japanese roleplaying games. It has 2-D graphics, for when the characters are moving about, and static (if much more detailed) pictures for when the characters are conversing. The player directs the main character around a series of maps, along the way forming a party and battling random monsters. The bat-

tles are turn based with the characters employing attacks, powers, and items to defeat foes. And, as so often, the main character is a young man on a quest to secure a weapon that will save the world from an unbeatable foe. There are a lot of familiar elements here.

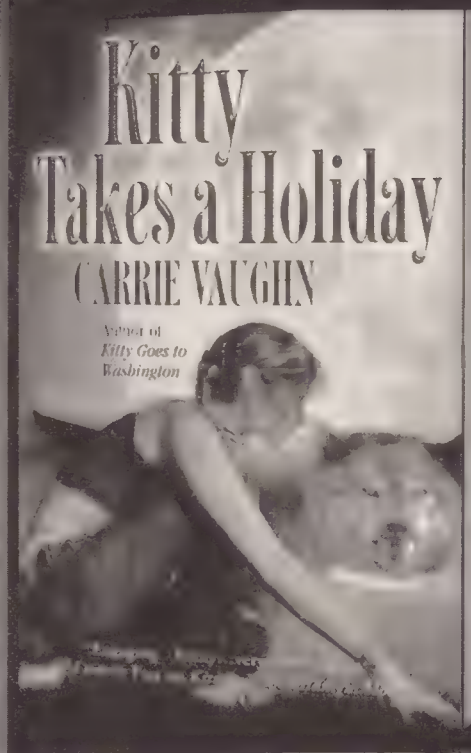
What is different about *ATMoE* is that the quest to save the world is sort of by the way to the real story of the game, which is the hero's relationship with two Reyvateils. In the world of the game, sound has power and songs are spells. Reyvateils are priestesses who know the songs to sing. Unlike the hero, Lyner Barsett, the two Reyvateils, Misha Arsellec Lune and Aurica Nestmile, don't gain power by earning experience and leveling up. They become more powerful by deepening their relationships with Lyner. In practice this mean that at the save points, the player can choose to have Lyner talk to whichever girl is currently in his party.

Finishing new dialog trees brings the characters closer together.

At certain intervals of closeness, the player can have Lyner and the girls literally take things to the next level. In this case, that level is the girls' soul space. This is a world inside the girl's head where various aspects of her character are represented by different characters. The player interacts with these characters, learning more about the girl. The reward for finishing a soul space level is a new song and often a new costume for the girl, both of which will help in the next round of battles. Given the limitations of its format, *ATMoE* is different enough to be a very engrossing game. The random battles can get tiresome, but the story and the relationships keep things moving.

On the heels of its success with combining *Star Wars* and Legos to make a video game, the game studio Travellers Tales has cre-

All work and no play makes Kitty a dull girl...



After getting caught turning wolf on national television, Kitty retreats to a mountain cabin to write her memoirs and hide out in the quiet. Not a chance in hell. First some freak leaves animal sacrifices on her front porch, then a werewolf hunter shows up, followed by a hideous creature with red eyes.

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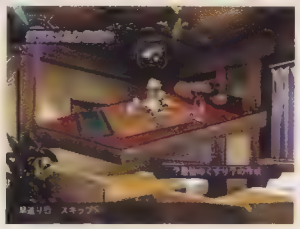
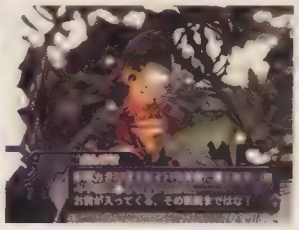




ated a game based on an actual Legos franchise: Bionicle. The game is ***Bionicle Heroes*** and it is available on the PS2, Xbox 360, and GameCube, and will be out shortly on the Wii. It will be interesting to see if the game will be expanded for that console since right now none of its mechanics would be improved by the use of a Wii mote.

Just like the *Star Wars* games, *BH* is not intended as an introduction to the world and lore of the franchise. The game is aimed straight at players, particularly kids, who are already fans of the skeletal robots, their island home, and their Polynesian names. And like the *Star Wars* games, the game can be enjoyed as a stand-alone. but it is more fun if the player has an idea of where these robots came from and why they keep changing masks.

Considering its target audience, *BH*'s biggest flaw is its lack of a moving and shooting tutorial as it opens. Of course, the designers may have felt that these days, there is no need to tell kids how to move their character and shoot its gun in a video game, but if *BH* is your first game, it is going to take you some time to get out of the starting area. Once you do, there is more help to be had, and by the end of the first level, you'll have learned all you need to know to complete the game.

The strangest part of *BH* may also have to do with its target audience. Gameplay consists of the player blowing up enemies and the scenery, both of which burst into component Lego parts that the players quickly gather. When they've gathered enough Legos, the character enters hero mode, where it is invincible. This is strange because the Lego parts aren't hard to gather, so even though they reset at each stage, the character still spends over half the game completely safe from harm. On the one hand, this keeps kids from getting frustrated, but the lack of danger also lowers the tension and immersion of the game. Overall *BH* will entertain fans of the franchise, but everyone else will probably have more fun with the deeper game play of the *Star Wars* games.

The attractive thing about ***Scourge of the Howling Horde,*** a 32-page adventure for *Dungeons & Dragons,* is that it is for first-level characters. It is an odd paradox of *D&D,* a game that has been around for decades, that there is a plethora of supplements and adventures for mid-level and high-level characters, but there is a dearth of material for parties that are starting from level one. *SotHH* gives brand-new Dungeon Masters and brand new players a place to begin.

The adventure takes advantage of one of the strengths of the dungeon crawl genre: everything is scalable. The basic story line of *SotHH* (dragon invades cave, threatens town, must be defeated) is even older than Tolkien's *Hobit,* but usually when it is done in games, it is with old dragons against high-level characters. Here, the dragon is very young but she is still a dragon. And the players will be first level (at least at the start of the adventure) so she and her goblin henchlings are a real threat both to the community and the characters.

The format of *SotHH* gives each encounter its own two-page spread with the map and the NPCs' statistics all right there for the Game Master to refer to. The adventure is broken up into stages so that the relatively weak characters are challenged, but then have a chance to rest up before taking on the next threat. There is a good mix of straight-up fights, dangerous traps, and opportunities for roleplaying and ingenuity. Players have ample room to be creative and to come at the presented threats in ways that would be impossible in a computer game of the same plot. This is an excellent gaming aid for anyone starting a new *D&D* campaign, or anyone starting a *D&D* game for the first time.❧

dragon

Continued from page 69

"You won't die. die," the dragon said. "Not until I have cleaned the last flecks of your soul from your bones. your bones."

"That's all I need to know ..."

It settled back. and Paul felt the swell of furnace-heat through its belly-scales, rising.

"Maybe I'm an open book ..."

Sulfur-stench washed over him. The dragon smiled again.

"Because I know you're mine ..." tan! tan!

Hand down to his pocket—more bullets, maybe ... It opened its jaws.

"But you won't need to read between the liiiiines!"

A silver bead—as the firebreath started. he forced his fist into the dragon's mouth.

"For your eyes onlyyyyy!"

It gulped back the flame in a confused snort and sucked the bead down its gullet—the lamps came on, and Paul dropped.

"Only for youuuuu!"

Paul crawled away—the tunnel flames retreated—and the dragon foamed, talons splitting the stone.

"You see what no one else can see ..."

It choked and thrashed. It was wingless, and now. as the color drained. its scales looked dull brown, almost ordinary. The rock walls were blank, the ghosts gone.

"Now I'm breaking free—for your eyes onlyyyyy!"

Finally, it collapsed, heaving and snorting fire.

"Only for youuuuu!"

Paul stumbled around the corner: there was the elevator.

"The passions that collide in me ..."

He tapped the button, nothing happened.

"Wild. abandoned side of me ..."

Limping, his arm already swelling from the dragon's breath—going to leave a fucking scar—he jammed the button again. Pop smiled from the end of the tunnel.

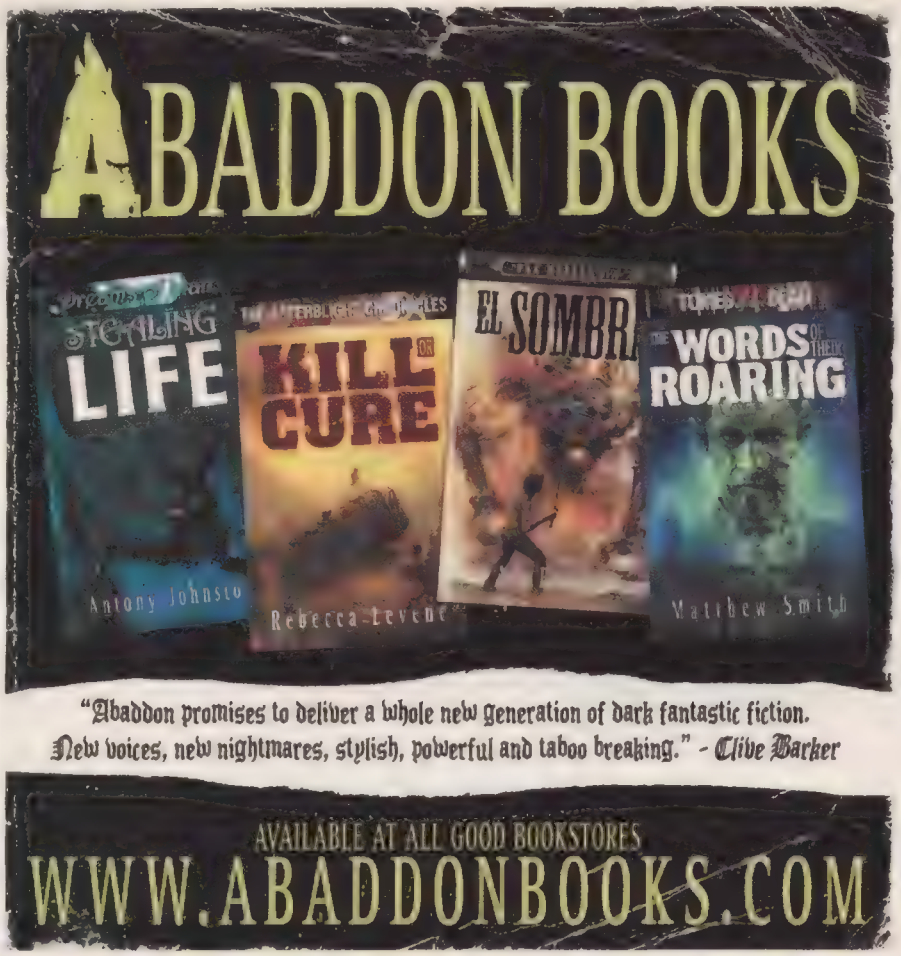
"Only for youuuuu!"

Pop was gone, never there. The elevator door opened.

"For your eyes onlyyyyy ..."

The song thumped and, as the doors closed, the music slowly—mercifully—faded out.

Sawyer's would be Paul's last job. He staggered into the chicken-man's office, helped the tortured women outside to his truck. bought six gallons of gasoline at the Shell station and went back until the place was drenched. Then, as he drove away, burned and bloody—women sleeping in the backseat—he watched Sawyer's explode in the rearview. In front of Shine's, on the way to State Road 6. Rose was hunched on the front stoop, head in her hands. Paul didn't slow, heard beads crunch under the tires. She laughing or crying? Didn't matter. He smacked the steering wheel, tasted tears, and drove on. ❧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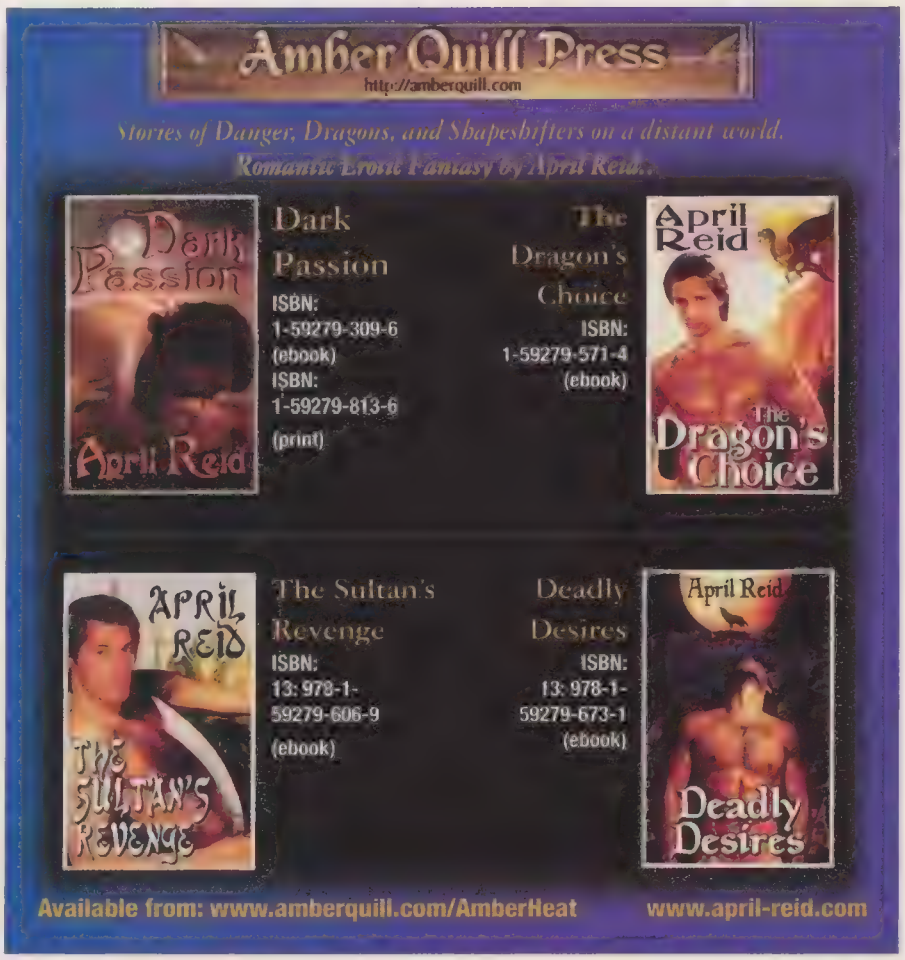

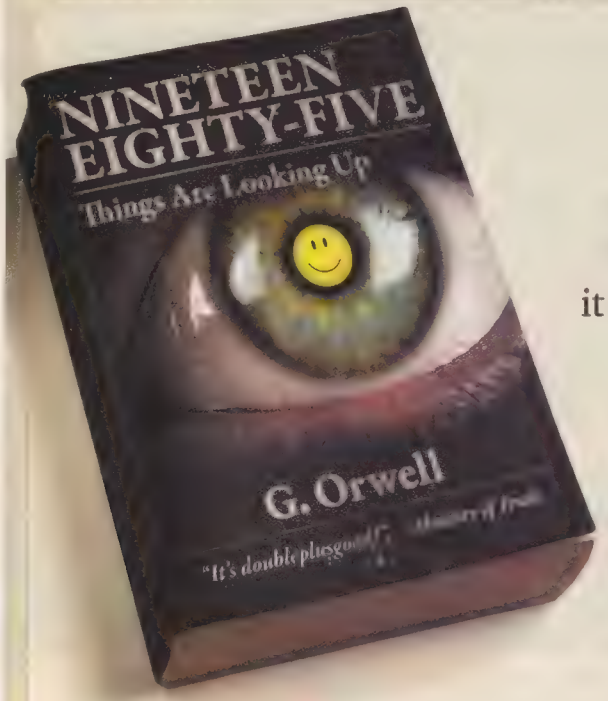

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buddha

Continued from page 45

"Hey," says Darlene. "He's gonna ruin the merchandise."

And that's when she gets to do what she's been itching for.

She rips away the burqa and wimple and shakes her frizzed-out mane free.

The Talibs freeze and gasp at this womanly impiety.

The shock gives her the time she needs to pull out her snub-nosed thirty-eight.

She shoots just as comb-boy swings his hammer at the Buddha.

It's true I call her Mighty Mouse but tonight Darlene's in Annie Oakley mode. She shoots the hammer right out of DiCaprio's hand.

That's when folks get good and annoyed.

DiCaprio howls and shakes his stung hand.

Assorted Talibs swing their Kalashnikovs in our direction.

Fazil the Chechen grabs for his RPG launcher.

And that's when the chutney jar's last rubber band pops.

Baba Jan falls smack on his rump and a jet of smoke plumes up from the glass. It coils and writhes and wreaths itself around the Buddha.

Fazil aims at the statue and fires his grenade launcher just as the smoke-coils flare a lightning flash.

There's a VROOSH and somehow the grenade round goes wide and hits a Datsun pickup engine-block.

Another lightning flare from the smoke plume.

Fazil the Chechen's beard catches fire. DiCaprio comb-boy's coiffure is in flames. The other Talibs find their turbans ignited.

All run from the spot out into the dark.

The smoke-wreaths wisp away into nothing. But for one second I see the Buddha's eyes flash and glow.

Baba Jan says Siddhartha the djinn has found a home and a job: to stay here and guard the statue. I believe now, he says, no one will think of disturbing this site.

I'm inclined to agree.

We head back to the car. The sorcerer is saying something about how he's sure we've all drawn a bit of enlightenment from tonight's encounter.

Well. It's true moments like this almost make one reconsider one's line of work.

Almost.

Darlene takes me aside to make an offer.

Win-win proposition. She's heard of a dealer in Islamabad who's got some fourth-century ivories in very sweet condition. She says if I tag along to cover her back she'll give me a piece of the take. Thirty percent.

I tell her make it fifty-fifty and it's a deal.

She says we can fight over it on the drive up to Islamabad.

Sounds good to me. ❧

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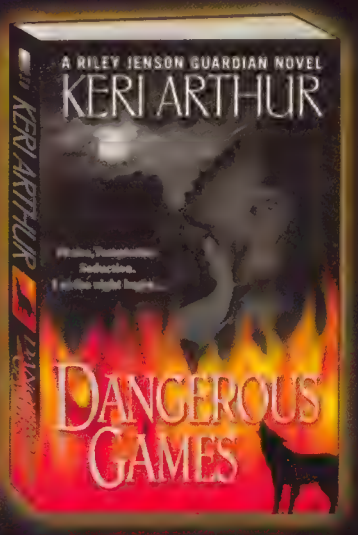

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—Sean Williams, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Blood Debt*

From

THE NAME OF THE WIND

If this story is to be something resembling my book of deeds, we must begin at the beginning. At the heart of who I truly am. To do this, you must remember that before I was anything else, I was one of the Edema Ruh.

Contrary to popular belief, not all traveling performers are of the Ruh. My troupe was not some poor batch of mummers, japing at crossroads for pennies, singing for our suppers. We were court performers, Lord Greyfallow's Men. Our arrival in most towns was more of an event than the Midwinter Pageantry and Solinade Games rolled together. There were usually at least eight wagons in our troupe and well over two dozen performers: actors and acrobats, musicians and hand magicians, jugglers and jesters. My family.

My father was a better actor and musician than any you have ever seen. My mother had a natural gift for words. They were both beautiful, with dark hair and easy laughter. They were Ruh down to their bones, and that, really, is all that needs to be said.

Save perhaps that my mother was a noble before she was a trouper. She told me my father had lured her away from "a miserable dreary hell" with sweet music and sweeter words. I could only assume she meant Three Crossings, where we went to visit relatives when I was very young. Once.

My parents were never really married, by which I mean they never bothered making their relationship official with any church. I'm not embarrassed by the fact. They considered themselves married and didn't see much point in announcing it to any government or god. I respect that. In truth, they seemed more content and faithful than many officially married couples I have seen since.

Our patron was Baron Greyfallow, and his name opened many doors that would ordinarily be closed to the Edema Ruh. In return we wore his colors, green and grey, and added to his reputation wherever we went. Once a year we spent two span at his manor, entertaining him and his household.

It was a happy childhood, growing up in the center of an endless fair. My father would read to me from the great monologues during the long wagon rides

between towns. Reciting mostly from memory, his voice would roll down the road for a quarter mile. I remember reading along, coming in on the secondary parts. My father would encourage me to try particularly good sections myself, and I learned to love the feel of good words.

My mother and I would make up songs together. Other times my parents would act out romantic dialogues while I followed along in the books. They seemed like games at the time. Little did I know how cunningly I was being taught.

I was a curious child: quick with questions and eager to learn. With acrobats and actors as my teachers, it is little wonder that I never grew to dread lessons as most children do.

The roads were safer in those days, but cautious folk would still travel with our troupe for safety's sake. They supplemented my education. I learned an eclectic smattering of Commonwealth law from a traveling barrister too drunk or too pompous to realize he was lecturing an eight-year old. I learned woodcraft from a huntsman named Laclith who traveled with us for nearly a whole season.

I learned the sordid inner workings of the royal court in Modeg from a... courtesan. As my father used to say: "Call a jack a jack. Call a spade a spade. But always call a whore a lady. Their lives are hard enough, and it never hurts to be polite."

Hetera smelled vaguely of cinnamon, and at nine years old I found her fascinating without exactly knowing why. She taught me I should never do anything in private that I didn't want talked about in public, and cautioned me to not talk in my sleep.

And then there was Abenthy, my first real teacher. He taught me more than all the others set end to end. If not for him, I would never have become the man I am today.

I ask that you not hold it against him. He meant well.

"You'll have to move along," the mayor said. "Camp outside town and no one will bother you so long as you don't start any fights or wander off with anything that isn't yours." He gave my father a significant look. "Then be on your merry way tomorrow. No performances. They're more trouble than they're worth."

"We *are* licensed," my father said, pulling out a folded piece of parchment from the inner pocket of his jacket. "Charged to perform, in fact."

The mayor shook his head and made no motion to look at our writ of patronage. "It makes folk rowdy," he said firmly. "Last time there was an unholy row during the play. Too much drinking, too much excitement. Folks tore the doors off the public house and smashed up the tables. The hall belongs to the town, you see. The town bears the expense of the repairs."

By this time our wagons were drawing attention. Trip was doing some juggling. Marion and his wife were putting on an impromptu string-puppet show. I was watching my father from the back of our wagon.

"We certainly would not want to offend you *or* your patron," the mayor said. "However the town can ill afford another evening such as that. As a gesture of goodwill I'm willing to offer you a copper each, say twenty pennies, simply to be on your way and not make any trouble for us here."

Now you have to understand that twenty pennies might be a good bit of money for some little ragamuffin troupe living hand-to-mouth. But for us it was simply insulting. He should have offered us forty to play for the evening, free use of the public hall, a good meal, and beds at the inn. The last we would graciously decline, as their beds were no doubt lousy and those in our wagons were not.

If my father was surprised or insulted, he did not show it. "Pack up!" He shouted over one shoulder.

Trip tucked his juggling stones into various pockets without so much as a flourish. There was a disappointed chorus from several dozen townsfolk as the puppets stopped mid-jape and were packed away. The mayor looked relieved, brought out his purse, and pulled out two silver pennies.

"I'll be sure to tell the baron of your generosity," my father said carefully as the mayor lay the pennies into his hand.

The mayor froze mid motion. "Baron?"

"Baron Greyfallow." My father paused, looking for some spark of recognition on the mayor's face. "Lord of the eastern marshes, Hudumbran-by-Thiren, and the Wydeconte Hills." My father looked around at the horizon. "We *are* still in the Wydeconte Hills, aren't we?"

"Well yes," the mayor said. "But Squire Semelan..."

"Oh, we're in *Semelan's* fief!" my father exclaimed, looking around as if just now getting his bearings. "Thin gentleman, tidy little beard?" He brushed his chin with his fingers. The mayor nodded numbly. "Charming fellow, lovely singing voice. Met him when we were entertaining the baron last Midwinter."

"Of course," the mayor paused significantly. "Might I see your writ?"

I watched as the mayor read it. It took him a little while, as my father had not bothered to mention the majority of the baron's titles such as the Viscount of Montrone and Lord of Trelliston. The upshot was this: it was true that the Squire Semelan controlled this little town and all the land around it, but Semelan owed fealty directly to Greyfallow. In more concrete terms, Greyfallow was captain of the ship; Semelan scrubbed the planking and saluted him.

The mayor refolded the parchment and handed it back to my father. "I see."

That was all. I remember being stunned when the mayor didn't apologize

or offer my father more money.

My father paused as well, then continued, "The city is your jurisdiction, sir. But we'll perform either way. It will either be here or just outside the city limits."

"Ye can't use the public house," the mayor said firmly. "I won't have it wrecked again."

"We can play right here," my father pointed to the market square. "It will be enough space, and it keeps everyone right here in town."

The mayor hesitated, though I could hardly believe it. We sometimes chose to play on the green because the local buildings weren't big enough. Two of our wagons were built to become stages for just that eventuality. But in my whole eleven years of memory I could barely count on both hands the times we'd been *forced* to play the green. We had never played outside the city limits.

But we were spared that. The mayor nodded at last and gestured my father closer. I slipped out the back of the wagon and moved close enough to catch the end of what he said, "—God-fearing folk around here. Nothing vulgar or heretical. We had a double handful of trouble with the last troupe that came through here, two fights, folks missing their laundry, and one of Branston's daughters got herself in a family way."

I was outraged. I waited for my father to show the mayor the sharp side of his tongue, to explain the difference between mere traveling performers and Edema Ruh. We didn't steal. We would never let things get so out of control that a bunch of drunks ruined the hall where we were playing.

But my father did nothing of the sort, he just nodded and walked back toward our wagon. He gestured and Trip started juggling again. The puppets re-emerged from their cases.

As he came around the wagon he saw me standing, half-hidden beside the horses. "I'm guessing you heard the whole thing from the look on your face," he said with a wry grin. "Let it go, my boy. He gets full marks for honesty if not for grace. He just says out loud what other folk keep in the quiet of their hearts. Why do you think I have everyone stay in pairs when we go about our business in bigger towns?"

I knew it for the truth. Still, it was a hard pill for a young boy to swallow. "Twenty pennies," I said scathingly. "As if he were offering us charity."

That was the hardest part of growing up Edema Ruh. We are strangers everywhere. Many folk view us as vagabonds and beggars, while others deem us little more than thieves, heretics, and whores. It's hard to be wrongfully accused, but it's worse when the people looking down on you are clods who have never read a book or traveled more than twenty miles from the place they were born.

My father laughed and roughed my hair. "Just pity him, my boy. Tomorrow

we'll be on our way, but he'll have to keep his own disagreeable company until the day he dies."

"He's an ignorant blatherskate," I said bitterly.

He lay a firm hand on my shoulder, letting me know I'd said enough. "This is what comes of getting too close to Atur, I suppose. Tomorrow we'll head south: greener pastures, kinder folk, prettier women." He cupped an ear toward the wagon and nudged me with his elbow.

"I can hear everything you say," my mother called sweetly from inside. My father grinned and winked at me.

"So what play are we going to do?" I asked my father. "Nothing vulgar, mind you. They're God-fearing folk in these parts."

He looked at me. "What would you pick?"

I gave it a long moment's thought. "I'd play something from the Brightfield Cycle. *The Forging of the Path* or somesuch."

My father made a face. "Not a very good play."

I shrugged. "They won't know the difference. Besides, it's chock full of Tehlu, so no one will complain about it being vulgar." I looked up at the sky. "I just hope it doesn't rain on us halfway through. "

My father looked up at the clouds. "It will. Still, there are worse things than playing in the rain."

"Like playing in the rain and getting shimmed on the deal?" I asked.

The mayor hurried up to us, moving at a fast walk. There was a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead and he was puffing a little bit, as if he'd been running. "I talked it over with a few members of the council and we decided that it would be quite all right for you to use the public house if you would care to."

My father's body language was perfect. It was perfectly clear he was offended but far too polite to say anything. "I certainly wouldn't want to put you out...."

"No, no. No bother at all. I insist, in fact."

"Very well, if you insist."

The mayor smiled and hurried away.

"Well that's a little better," my father sighed. "No need to tighten our belts yet."

"Halfpenny a head. That's right. Anyone without a head gets in free. Thank you, sir."

Trip was working the door, making sure everyone paid to see the play. "Halfpenny a head. Though by the rosy glow in your lady's cheeks I should be charging you for a head and a half. Not that it's any of my business, mind you."

Trip had the quickest tongue of anyone in the troupe, which made him the best man for the job of making sure no one tried to fast-talk or bully their way inside. Wearing his green and grey jester's motley, Trip could say just about anything and get away with it.

"Hello, mum, no charge for the little one, but if he starts to squawk you'd best give him the tit quick or take him outside." Trip carried on his unending patter. "That's right, halfpenny. Yes, sir, empty head still pays full price."

Though it was always fun to watch Trip work, most of my attention was on a wagon that had rolled into the other end of town about a quarter hour ago. The mayor had argued with the old man driving it, then stormed off. Now I saw the mayor heading back to the wagon accompanied by a tall fellow carrying a long cudgel, the constable unless I missed my guess.

My curiosity got the best of me and I made my way toward the wagon, doing my best to stay out of sight. The mayor and the old man were arguing again by the time I got close enough to hear. The constable stood nearby, looking irritated and anxious.

"...told you. I don't have a license. I don't *need* a license. Does a peddler need a license? Does a tinker need a license?"

"You're not a tinker," the mayor said. "Don't try to pass yourself off as one."

"I'm not trying to pass myself off as anything," the old man snapped. "I'm a tinker and a peddler, and I'm more than both. I'm an *arcanist*, you great dithering heap of idiot."

"My point exactly," the mayor said doggedly. "We're God-fearing people in these parts. We don't want any meddling with dark things better left alone. We don't want the trouble your kind can bring."

"My kind?" the old man said. "What do you know about my kind? There probably hasn't been an arcanist through these parts in fifty years."

"We like it that way. Just turn around and go back the way you came."

"Like hell if I'm spending a night in the rain because of your thick head," the old man said hotly. "I don't need your permission to rent a room or do business in the street. Now get away from me or I'll show you firsthand what sort of trouble *my kind* can be."

Fear flashed across the mayor's face before it was overwhelmed by outrage. He gestured over one shoulder at the constable. "Then you'll spend the night in jail for vagrancy and threatening behavior. We'll let you on your way in the morning if you've learned to keep a civil tongue in your head." The constable advanced on the wagon, his cudgel held cautiously at his side.

The old man stood his ground and raised one hand. A deep, red light welled up from the front corners of his wagon. "That's far enough," he said ominously.

"Things could get ugly otherwise."

After a moment's surprise, I realized the strange light came from a pair of sympathy lamps the old man had mounted on his wagon. I had seen one before, in Lord Greyfallow's library. They were brighter than gaslight, steadier than candles or lamps, and lasted nearly forever. They were also terribly expensive. I was willing to bet that no one in this little town had ever heard of them, let alone seen one.

The constable stopped in his tracks when the light began to swell. But when nothing else seemed to happen, he set his jaw and kept walking toward the wagon.

The old man's expression grew anxious. "Now hold on a moment," he said as the red light from the wagon started to fade. "We don't want..."

"Shut your clepper, you old shit-fire," the constable said. He snatched at the arcanist's arm as if he were sticking his hand into an oven. Then, when nothing happened, he smiled and grew more confident. "Don't think I won't knock you a good one to keep you from working any more of your devilry."

"Well done, Tom," the mayor said, radiating relief. "Bring him along and we'll send someone back for the wagon."

The constable grinned and twisted the old man's arm. The arcanist bent at the waist and gasped a short, painful breath.

From where I hid, I saw the arcanist's face change from anxious, to pained, to angry all in a second. I saw his mouth move.

A furious gust of wind came out of nowhere, as if a storm had suddenly burst with no warning. The wind struck the old man's wagon and it tipped onto two wheels before slamming back down onto four. The constable staggered and fell as if he had been struck by the hand of God. Even where I hid nearly thirty feet away the wind was so strong that I was forced to take a step forward, as if I'd been pushed roughly from behind.

"Begone!" the old man shouted angrily. "Trouble me no longer! I will set fire to your blood and fill you with a fear like ice and iron!" There was something familiar about his words, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Both the mayor and the constable turned tail and ran, their eyes white and wild as startled horses'.

The wind faded as quickly as it had come. The whole sudden burst couldn't have lasted more than five seconds. As most of the townsfolk were gathered around the public house I doubted anyone had seen it except for me, the mayor, the constable, and the old man's donkeys who stood placidly in their harness, utterly unperturbed.

"Leave this place clean of your foul presence," the arcanist muttered to himself as he watched them go. "By the power of my name I command it to be so."

I finally realized why his words seemed so familiar. He was quoting lines from the exorcism scene in *Daeonica*. Not many folk knew that play.

The old man turned back to his wagon and began to extemporize. "I'll turn you into butter on a summer day. I'll turn you into a poet with the soul of a priest. I'll fill you with lemon custard and push you out a window." He spat. "Bastards."

His irritation seemed to leave him and he heaved a great, weary sigh. "Well that couldn't have gone much worse," the old man muttered as he rubbed at the shoulder of the arm the constable had twisted. "Do you think they'll come back with a mob behind them?"

For a second I thought the old man was talking to me. Then I realized the truth. He was talking to his donkeys.

"I don't think so either," he said to them. "But I've been wrong before. Let's stay near the edge of town and have a look at the last of the oats, shall we?"

He clambered up into the back of the wagon and came down with a wide bucket and a nearly empty burlap sack. He upended the sack into the bucket and seemed disheartened by the results. He took out a handful for himself before nudging the bucket toward the donkeys with his foot. "Don't give me that look," he said to them. "It's short rations all around. Besides, you can graze." He petted one donkey while he ate his handful of rough oats, stopping occasionally to spit out a husk.

It struck me as very sad, this old man all alone on the road with no one to talk to but his donkeys. It's hard for us Edema Ruh, but at least we had each other. This man had no one.

"We've wandered too far from civilization, boys. The folk that need me don't trust me, and the ones that trust me can't afford me." The old man peered into his purse. "We've got a penny and a half, so our options are limited. Do we want to be wet tonight or hungry tomorrow? We're not going to do any business, so it will probably be one or the other."

I slunk around the edge of the building until I could see what was written on the side of the old man's wagon. It read:

ABENTHY: ARCANIST EXTRAORDINARY.
Scribe. Dowser. Chemist. Dentist.
Rare Goods. All Alements Tended.
Lost Items Found. Anything Mended.
No Horoscopes. No Love Potions. No Malefaction.

Abenthy noticed me as soon as I stepped out from behind the building where I'd been hiding. "Hello there. Can I help you?"

"You've misspelled 'ailments'," I pointed out.

He looked surprised. "It's a joke, actually," he explained. "I brew a bit."

"Oh. Ale." I said, nodding. "I get it." I brought my hand out of my pocket. "Can you sell me anything for a penny?"

He seemed stuck between amusement and curiosity. "What are you looking for?"

"I'd like some lacillium." We had performed *Farien the Fair* a dozen times in the last month, and it had filled my young mind with intrigue and assassination.

"Are you expecting someone to poison you?" he said, somewhat taken aback.

"Not really. But it seems to me that if you wait around until you know you need an antidote, it's probably too late to pick one up."

"I suppose I could sell you a penny's worth," he said. "That would be about a dose for a person your size. But it's dangerous stuff in its own right. It only cures certain poisons. You can hurt yourself if you take it at the wrong time."

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know that." In the play it was touted as an infallible cure-all.

Abenthy tapped his lips thoughtfully. "Can you answer me a question in the meantime?" I nodded. "Whose troupe is that?"

"In a way it's mine," I said. "But in another way, it's my father's because he runs the show and points which way the wagons go. But it's Baron Greyfallow's too, because he's our patron. We're Lord Greyfallow's Men."

The old man gave me an amused look. "I've heard of you. Good troupe. Good reputation."

I nodded, not seeing any point in false modesty.

"Do you think your father might be interested in taking on any help?" he asked. "I don't claim to be much of an actor, but I'm handy to have around. I could make you face paint and rouge that aren't all full of lead and mercury and arsenic. I can do lights, too, quick, clean, and bright. Different colors if you want them."

I didn't have to think too hard about it; candles were expensive and vulnerable to drafts, torches were dirty and dangerous. And everyone in the troupe learned the dangers of cosmetics at an early age. It was hard to become an old, seasoned trouper when you painted poison on yourself every third day and ended up raving mad by the time you were twenty-five.

"I may be overstepping myself a little," I said as I held out my hand for him to shake. "But let me be the first to welcome you to the troupe."

If this is to be a full and honest account of my life and deeds, I feel I should mention that my reasons for inviting Ben into our troupe were not entirely altruistic. It's true that quality cosmetics and clean lights were a welcome addition to our troupe. It's also true that I'd felt sorry for the old man alone on the road.

But underneath it all I was moved by my curiosity. I had seen Abenthy do something I could not explain. Something strange and wonderful. Not his trick with the sympathy lamps—I recognized that for what it was: showmanship, a bluff to impress ignorant townsfolk.

What he had done afterward was different. He called the wind and the wind came. It was magic. Real magic. The sort of magic I'd heard about in stories of Taborlin the Great. The sort of magic I hadn't believed in since I was six. Now I didn't know what to believe.

So I invited him into our troupe, hoping to find answers to my questions. Though I didn't know it at the time, I was looking for the name of the wind.

Chapter Nine:
Riding in the Wagon with Ben

Abenthy was the first arcanist I ever met, a strange, exciting figure to a young boy. He was knowledgeable in all the sciences: botany, astronomy, psychology, anatomy, alchemy, geology, chemistry....

He was portly, with twinkling eyes that moved quickly from one thing to another. He had a strip of dark grey hair running around the back of his head, but (and this is what I remember most about him) no eyebrows. Rather, he had them, but they were in a perpetual state of regrowing from being burned off in the course of his alchemical pursuits. It made him look surprised and quizzical all at once.

He spoke gently, laughed often, and never exercised his wit at the expense of others. He cursed like a drunken sailor with a broken leg, but only at his donkeys. They were called Alpha and Beta, and Abenthy fed them carrots and lumps of sugar when he thought no one was looking. Chemistry was his particular love, and my father said he'd never known a man to run a better still.

By his second day in our troupe I was making a habit of riding in his wagon. I would ask him questions and he would answer. Then he would ask for songs and I would pluck them out for him on a lute I borrowed from my father's wagon.

He would even sing from time to time. He had a bright, reckless tenor that was always wandering off, looking for notes in the wrong places. More often than not he stopped and laughed at himself when it happened. He was a good man, and there was no conceit in him.

Not long after he joined our troupe, I asked Abenthy what it was like being an arcanist.

He gave me a thoughtful look. "Have you ever known an arcanist?"

"We paid one to mend a cracked axle on the road once." I paused to think. "He was heading inland with a caravan of fish."

Abenthy made a dismissive gesture. "No no, boy. I'm talking about *arcanists*. Not some poor chill-charmer who works his way back and forth across caravan routes, trying to keep fresh meat from rotting."

"What's the difference?" I asked, sensing it was expected of me.

"Well," he said. "That might take a bit of explaining...."

"I've got nothing but time."

Abenthy gave me an appraising look. I'd been waiting for it. It was the look that said, "You don't sound as young as you look." I hoped he'd come to grips with it fairly soon. It gets tiresome being spoken to as if you are a child, even if you happen to be one.

He took a deep breath. "Just because someone knows a trick or two doesn't mean they're an arcanist. They might know how to set a bone or read Eld Vintic. Maybe they even know a little sympathy. But—"

"Sympathy?" I interrupted as politely as possible.

"You'd probably call it magic," Abenthy said reluctantly. "It's not, really." He shrugged. "But even knowing sympathy doesn't make you an arcanist. A true arcanist has worked his way through the Arcanum at the University."

At his mention of the Arcanum, I bristled with two dozen new questions. Not so many, you might think, but when you added them to the half-hundred questions I carried with me wherever I went, I was stretched nearly to bursting. Only through a severe effort of will did I remain silent, waiting for Abenthy to continue on his own.

Abenthy, however, noticed my reaction. "So, you've heard about the Arcanum, have you?" He seemed amused. "Tell me what you've heard, then."

This small prompt was all the excuse I needed. "I heard from a boy in Temper Glen that if your arm's cut off they can sew it back on at the University. Can they really? Some stories say Taborlin the Great went there to learn the names of all things. There's a library with a thousand books. Are there really that many?"

He answered the last question, the others having rushed by too quickly for him to respond. "More than a thousand, actually. Ten times ten thousand books. More than that. More books than you could ever read." Abenthy's voice grew vaguely wistful.

More books than I could read? Somehow I doubted that.

Ben continued. "The people you see riding with caravans—charmers who keep food from spoiling, dowsers, fortune-tellers, toad eaters—aren't real arcanists

any more than all traveling performers are Edema Ruh. They might know a little alchemy, a little sympathy, a little medicine." He shook his head. "But they're *not* arcanists.

"A lot of people pretend to be. They wear robes and put on airs to take advantage of the ignorant and gullible. But here's how you tell a true arcanist."

Abenthy pulled a fine chain over his head and handed it to me. It was the first time I had ever seen an Arcanum guilder. It looked rather unimpressive, just a flat piece of lead with some unfamiliar writing stamped into it.

"That is a true *gilthe*. Or guilder if you prefer," Abenthy explained with some satisfaction. "It's the only sure way to be certain of who is and who isn't an arcanist. Your father asked to see mine before he let me ride with your troupe. It shows he's a man of the world." He watched me with a sly disinterest. "Uncomfortable, isn't it?"

I gritted my teeth and nodded. My hand had gone numb as soon as I'd touched it. I was curious to study the markings on its front and back, but after the space of two breaths, my arm was numb to the shoulder, as if I had slept on it all night. I wondered if my whole body would go numb if I held it long enough.

I was prevented from finding out, as the wagon hit a bump and my numbed hand almost let Abenthy's guilder fall to the footboard of the wagon. He snatched it up and slipped it back over his head, chuckling.

"How can you stand it?" I asked, trying to rub a little feeling back into my hand.

"It only feels that way to other people," he explained. "To its owner, it's just warm. That's how you can tell the difference between an arcanist and someone who has a knack for finding water or guessing at the weather."

"Trip has something like that," I said. "He rolls sevens."

"That's a little different," Abenthy laughed. "Not anything so unexplainable as a knack." He slouched a little farther down into his seat. "Probably for the best. A couple hundred years ago, a person was good as dead if folk saw he had a knack. The Tehlins called them demon signs, and burned folk if they had them." Abenthy's mood seemed to have taken a downward turn.

"We had to break Trip out of jail once or twice," I said, trying to lighten the tone of the conversation. "But no one actually tried to burn him."

Abenthy gave a tired smile. "I suspect Trip has a pair of clever dice or an equally clever skill which probably extends to cards as well. I thank you for your timely warning, but a knack is something else entirely."

I can't abide being patronized. "Trip can't cheat to save his life," I said a little more sharply than I had intended. "And anyone in the troupe can tell good dice from bad. Trip throws sevens. It doesn't matter whose dice he uses, he rolls sevens. If he bets on someone, they roll sevens. If he so much as bumps a table

with loose dice on it, seven."

"Hmmm." Abenthy nodded to himself. "My apologies. That does sound like a knack. I'd be curious to see it."

I nodded. "Take your own dice. We haven't let him play for years." A thought occurred to me. "It might not still work."

He shrugged. "Knacks don't go away so easily as that. When I was growing up in Staup, I knew a young man with a knack. Uncommonly good with plants." Abenthy's grin was gone as he looked off at something I couldn't see. "His tomatoes would be red while everyone else's vines were still climbing. His squash were bigger and sweeter, his grapes didn't hardly have to be bottled before they started being wine." He trailed off, his eyes far away.

"Did they burn him?" I asked with the morbid curiosity of the young.

"What? No, of course not. I'm not that old." He scowled at me in mock severity. "There was a drought and he got run out of town. His poor mother was heartbroken."

There was a moment of silence. Two wagons ahead of us, I heard Teren and Shandi rehearsing lines from *The Swineherd and the Nightingale.*

Abenthy seemed to be listening as well, in an offhand way. After Teren got himself lost halfway through Fain's garden monologue, I turned back to face him. "Do they teach acting at the University?" I asked.

Abenthy shook his head, slightly amused by the question. "Many things, but not that."

I looked over at Abenthy and saw him watching me, his eyes danced.

"Could you teach me some of those other things?" I asked.

He smiled, and it was as easy as that.

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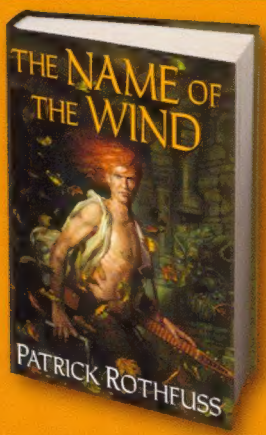

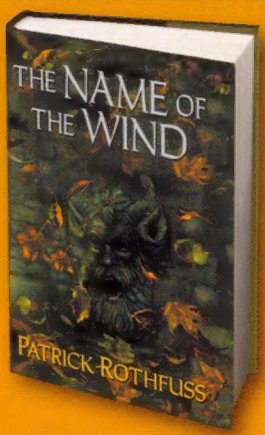

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